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# STEPHEN KING



## NIGHT SHIFT

includes stories from the feature films,  
**CHILDREN OF THE CORN** and **CAT'S EYE**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine, in 1946. He won a scholarship to the University of Maine and later taught English, while his wife, Tabitha, got her degree. He sold his first short stories to *Startling Mystery Stories* magazine during the late 1960s, but it was the publication of his first novel **CARRIE** and its subsequent film adaptation that set him on his way to his present position as the world's Number One horror story writer. **CARRIE** was followed by '**SALEM'S LOT** (later filmed for television), **THE SHINING** (filmed by Stanley Kubrick), a collection of short stories, **NIGHT SHIFT**, **THE STAND**, **CHRISTINE** and **PET SEMATARY**. He has also written **THINNER** under the pseudonym Richard Bachman.

The man who has scared more readers than most says: 'I do write out my own fears, but I don't scare myself. The plots aren't dreamed up in the dark watches of the night. The idea may pop into my mind in bright sunlight while I'm tooling along the highway. Then I'll bounce it around, sit down and write.'

Stephen King lives with his wife and their three children in a small village on the edge of a lake in Maine, his home state and the place where he feels he really belongs.

**Books by Stephen King published by  
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**CARRIE  
'SALEM'S LOT  
THE SHINING  
NIGHT SHIFT  
THE STAND  
CHRISTINE  
PET SEMATARY**

**And by Stephen King writing as  
Richard Bachman:**

**THINNER**

# Night Shift

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Stephen King



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## INTRODUCTION

I am often given the big smiling handshake at parties (which I avoid attending whenever possible) by someone who then, with an air of gleeful conspiracy, will say, 'You know, I've always wanted to write.'

I used to try to be polite.

These days I reply with the same jubilant excitement: 'You know, I've always wanted to be a brain surgeon.'

They look puzzled. It doesn't matter. There are a lot of puzzled people wandering around lately.

If you want to write, you write.

The only way to learn to write is by writing. And that would not be a useful approach to brain surgery.

Stephen King always wanted to write and he writes.

So he wrote *Carrie* and *'Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*, and the good short stories you can read in this book and a stupendous number of other stories and books and fragments and poems and essays and other unclassifiable things, most of them too wretched to ever publish.

Because that is the way it is done.

Because there is no other way to do it. Not one other way.

Compulsive diligence is almost enough. But not quite. You have to have a taste for words. Gluttony. You have to want to roll in them. You have to read millions of them written by other people.

You read everything with grinding envy or a weary contempt.

You save the most contempt for the people who conceal ineptitude with long words, Germanic sentence structure, obtrusive symbols, and no sense of story, pace, or character.

Then you have to start knowing yourself so well that you begin to know other people. A piece of us is in every person we can ever meet.

Okay, then. Stupendous diligence, plus word-love, plus empathy, and out of that can come, painfully, some objectivity.

Never total objectivity.

At this frangible moment in time I am typing these words on my blue machine, seven lines down from the top of my page two of this introduction, knowing clearly the flavour and meaning I am hunting for, but not at all certain I am getting it.

Having been around twice as long as Stephen King, I have a little more objectivity about my work than he has about his.

It comes so painfully and so slowly.

You send books out into the world and it is very hard to shuck them out of the spirit. They are tangled children, trying to make their way in spite of the handicaps you have imposed on them. I would give a pretty to get them all back home and take one last good swing at every one of them. Page by page. Digging and cleaning, brushing and furnishing. Tidying up.

Stephen King is a far, far better writer at thirty than I was at thirty, or forty.

I am entitled to hate him a little bit for this.

And I think I know of a dozen demons hiding in the bushes where his path leads, and even if I had a way to warn him, it would be no good. He whips them or they whip him.

It is exactly that simple.

Are we all together so far?

Diligence, word-lust, empathy equal growing objectivity and then what?

Story. Story. Dammit, story!

Story is something happening to someone you have been led to care about. It can happen in any dimension – physical, mental, spiritual – and in combinations of those dimensions.

Without author intrusion.

Author intrusion is: 'My God, Mama, look how *nice* I'm writing!'

Another kind of intrusion is a grotesquerie. Here is one of my favourites, culled from a Big Best Seller of yester-year: 'His eyes slid down the front of her dress.'

Author intrusion is a phrase so inept the reader suddenly realizes he is reading, and he backs out of the story. He is shocked back out of the story.

Another author intrusion is the mini-lecture embedded in the story. This is one of my most grievous failings.

An image can be neatly done, be unexpected, and not break the spell. In a story in this book called 'Trucks,' Stephen King is writing about a tense scene of waiting in a truck shop, describing the people: 'He was a salesman and he kept his display bag close to him, like a pet dog that had gone to sleep.'

I find that neat.

In another story he demonstrates his good ear, the ring of exactness and truth he can give dialogue. A man and his wife are on a long trip. They are travelling a back road. She says: 'Yes, Burt. I know we're in Nebraska, Burt. But where the hell *are* we?' He says: 'You've got the road atlas. Look it up. Or can't you read?'

Nice. It looks so simple. Just like brain surgery. The knife has an edge. You hold it so. And cut.

Now at risk of being an iconoclast I will say that I do not give a diddly-whoop what Stephen King chooses as an area in which to write. The fact that he presently enjoys writing in the field of spooks and spells and slitherings in the cellar is to me the least important and useful fact about the man anyone can relate.

There are a lot of slitherings in here, and there is a maddened pressing machine that haunts me, as it will you, and there are enough persuasively evil children to fill Disney World on any Sunday in February, but the main thing is story.

One is led to care.

Note this. Two of the most difficult areas to write in are humour and the occult. In clumsy hands the humour turns to dirge and the occult turns funny.

But once you know how, you can write in any area.

Stephen King is not going to restrict himself to his present field of intense interest.

One of the most resonant and affecting stories in this book is 'The Last Rung on the Ladder.' A gem. Nary a rustle nor breath of other worlds in it.

Final word.

He does not write to please you. He writes to please himself. I write to please myself. When that happens, you will like the work too. These stories pleased Stephen King and they pleased me.

By strange coincidence on the day I write this, Stephen King's novel *The Shining* and my novel *Condominium* are both on the Best Seller List. We are not in competition for your attention with each other. We are in competition, I suppose, with the inept and pretentious and sensational books published by household names who have never really bothered to learn their craft.

In so far as story is concerned, and pleasure is concerned, there are not enough Stephen Kings to go around.

If you have read this whole thing, I hope you have plenty of time. You could have been reading the stories.

JOHN D. MACDONALD

## FOREWORD

Let's talk, you and I. Let's talk about fear.

The house is empty as I write this; a cold February rain is falling outside. It's night. Sometimes when the wind blows the way it's blowing now, we lose the power. But for now it's on, and so let's talk very honestly about fear. Let's talk very rationally about moving to the rim of madness . . . and perhaps over the edge.

My name is Stephen King. I am a grown man with a wife and three children. I love them, and I believe that the feeling is reciprocated. My job is writing, and it's a job I like very much. The stories – *Carrie*, *'Salem's Lot*, and *The Shining* – have been successful enough to allow me to write full-time, which is an agreeable thing to be able to do. At this point in my life I seem to be reasonably healthy. In the last year I have been able to reduce my cigarette habit from the unfiltered brand I had smoked since I was eighteen to a low nicotine and tar brand, and I still hope to be able to quit completely. My family and I live in a pleasant house beside a relatively unpolluted lake in Maine; last fall I awoke one morning and saw a deer standing on the back lawn by the picnic table. We have a good life.

Still . . . let's talk about fear. We won't raise our voices and we won't scream; we'll talk rationally, you and I. We'll talk about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unravelling with shocking suddenness.

At night, when I go to bed, I still am at pains to be sure that my legs are under the blanket after the lights go out.

I'm not a child any more but . . . I don't like to sleep with one leg sticking out. Because if a cool hand ever reached out from under the bed and grasped my ankle, I might scream. Yes, I might scream to wake the dead. That sort of thing doesn't happen, of course, and we all know that. In the stories that follow you will encounter all manner of night creatures; vampires, demon lovers, a thing that lives in the closet, all sorts of other terrors. None of them are real. The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn't real. I know that, and I also know that if I'm careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle.

Sometimes I speak before groups of people who are interested in writing or in literature, and before the question-and-answer period is over, someone always rises and asks this question: Why do you choose to write about such gruesome subjects?

I usually answer this with another question: *Why do you assume that I have a choice?*

Writing is a catch-as-catch-can sort of occupation. All of us seem to come equipped with filters on the floors of our minds, and all the filters having differing sizes and meshes. What catches in my filter may run right through yours. What catches in yours may pass through mine, no sweat. All of us seem to have a built-in obligation to sift through the sludge that gets caught in our respective mind-filters, and what we find there usually develops into some sort of sideline. The accountant may also be a photographer. The astronomer may collect coins. The schoolteacher may do gravestone rubbings in charcoal. The sludge caught in the mind's filter, the stuff that refuses to go through, frequently becomes each person's private obsession. In civilized society we have an unspoken agreement to call our obsessions 'hobbies.'

Sometimes the hobby can become a full-time job. The accountant may discover that he can make enough money

to support his family taking pictures; the schoolteacher may become enough of an expert on grave rubbings to go on the lecture circuit. And there are some professions which begin as hobbies and remain hobbies even after the practitioner is able to earn his living by pursuing his hobby; but because 'hobby' is such a bumpy, common-sounding little word, we also have an unspoken agreement that we will call our professional hobbies 'the arts.'

Painting. Sculpture. Composing. Singing. Acting. The playing of a musical instrument. Writing. Enough books have been written on these seven subjects alone to sink a fleet of luxury liners. And the only thing we seem to be able to agree upon about them is this: that those who practise these arts honestly would continue to practise them even if they were not paid for their efforts; even if their efforts were criticized or even reviled; even on pain of imprisonment or death. To me, that seems to be a pretty fair definition of obsessional behaviour. It applies to the plain hobbies as well as the fancy ones we call 'the arts'; gun collectors sport bumper stickers reading **YOU WILL TAKE MY GUN ONLY WHEN YOU PRY MY COLD DEAD FINGERS FROM IT**, and in the suburbs of Boston, housewives who discovered political activism during the busing furore often sported similar stickers reading **YOU'LL TAKE ME TO PRISON BEFORE YOU TAKE MY CHILDREN OUT OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD** on the back bumpers of their station wagons. Similarly, if coin collecting were outlawed tomorrow, the astronomer very likely wouldn't turn in his steel pennies and buffalo nickels; he'd wrap them carefully in plastic, sink them to the bottom of his toilet tank, and gloat over them after midnight.

We seem to be wandering away from the subject of fear, but we really haven't wandered very far. The sludge that catches in the mesh of my drain is often the stuff of fear. My obsession is with the macabre. I didn't write any of the stories which follow for money, although some of them were sold to magazines before they appeared here and I never once returned a cheque uncashed. I may be obses-

sional but I'm not *crazy*. Yet I repeat: I didn't write them for money; I wrote them because it occurred to me to write them. I have a marketable obsession. There are madmen and madwomen in padded cells the world over who are not so lucky.

I am not a great artist, but I have always felt impelled to write. So each day I sift the sludge anew, going through the cast-off bits and pieces of observation, of memory, of speculation, trying to make something out of the stuff that didn't go through the filter and down the drain into the subconscious.

Louis L'Amour, the Western writer, and I might both stand at the edge of a small pond in Colorado, and we both might have an idea at exactly the same time. We might both feel the urge to sit down and try to work it out in words. His story might be about water rights in a dry season, my story would more likely be about some dreadful, hulking thing rising out of the still waters to carry off sheep . . . and horses . . . and finally people. Louis L'Amour's 'obsession' centres on the history of the American West; I tend more towards things that slither by starlight. He writes Westerns; I write fearsomes. We're both a little bit nuts.

The arts are obsessional, and obsession is dangerous. It's like a knife in the mind. In some cases – Dylan Thomas comes to mind, and Ross Lockridge and Hart Crane and Sylvia Plath – the knife can turn savagely upon the person wielding it. Art is a localized illness, usually benign – creative people tend to live a long time – sometimes terribly malignant. You use the knife carefully, because you know it doesn't care who it cuts. And if you are wise you sift the sludge carefully . . . because some of that stuff may not be dead.

After the *why do you write that stuff* question has been disposed of, the companion question comes up: *Why do people read that stuff? What makes it sell?* This question

carries a hidden assumption with it, and the assumption is that the story about fear, the story about horror, is an unhealthy taste. People who write me often begin by saying, 'I suppose you will think I'm strange, but I really liked *'Salem's Lot'*, or 'Probably I'm morbid, but I enjoyed every page of *The Shining* . . .'

I think the key to this may lie in a line of movie criticism from *Newsweek* magazine. The review was of a horror film, not a very good one, and it went something like this: '. . . a wonderful movie for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents.' It's a good snappy line, but when you stop and think about it, it applies to all horror films and stories. *The Night of the Living Dead*, with its gruesome scenes of human cannibalism and matricide, was certainly a film for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents; and how about that little girl puking pea soup all over the priest in *The Exorcist*? Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, often a basis of comparison for the modern horror story (as it should be; it is the first with unabashedly psycho-Freudian overtones), features a maniac named Renfeld who gobbles flies, spiders, and finally a bird. He regurgitates the bird, having eaten its feathers and all. The novel also features the impalement – the ritual penetration, one could say – of a young and lovely female vampire and the murder of a baby and the baby's mother.

The great literature of the supernatural often contains the same 'let's slow down and look at the accident' syndrome: Beowulf slaughtering Grendel's mother; the narrator of 'The Tell-Tale Heart' dismembering his cataract-stricken benefactor and putting the pieces under the floorboards; the Hobbit Sam's grim battle with Shelob the spider in the final book of Tolkien's Rings trilogy.

There will be some who will object strenuously to this line of thought, saying that Henry James is not showing us a car accident in *The Turn of the Screw*; they will claim that Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories of the macabre, such as 'Young Goodman Brown' and 'The Minister's Black Veil',

are also rather more tasteful than *Dracula*. It's a nonsensical idea. They are still showing us the car accident; the bodies have been removed but we can still see the twisted wreckage and observe the blood on the upholstery. In some ways the delicacy, the lack of melodrama, the low and studied tone of rationality that pervades a story like 'The Minister's Black Veil' is even more terrible than Lovecraft's batrachian monstrosities or the auto-da-fé of Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'.

The fact is – and most of us know this in our hearts – that very few of us can forgo an uneasy peek at the wreckage bracketed by police cars and road flares on the turnpike at night. Senior citizens pick up the paper in the morning and immediately turn to the obituary column so they can see who they outlived. All of us are uneasily transfixed for a moment when we hear that a Dan Blocker has died, a Freddy Prinze, a Janis Joplin. We feel terror mixed with an odd sort of glee when we hear Paul Harvey on the radio telling us that a woman walked into a propeller blade during a rain squall at a small country airport or that a man in a giant industrial blender was vaporized immediately when a co-worker stumbled against the controls. No need to belabour the obvious; life is full of horrors small and large, but because the small ones are the ones we can comprehend, they are the ones that smack home with all the force of mortality.

Our interest in these pocket horrors is undeniable, but so is our own revulsion. The two of them mix uneasily, and the by-product of the mix seems to be guilt . . . a guilt which seems not much different from the guilt that used to accompany sexual awakening.

It is not my business to tell you not to feel guilty, any more than it is my business to justify my novels or the short stories which follow. But an interesting parallel between sex and fear can be observed. As we become capable of having sexual relationships, our interest in those relationships awakens; the interest, unless perverted some-

how, tends naturally towards copulation and the continuance of the species. As we become aware of our own unavoidable termination, we become aware of the fear-emotion. And I think that, as copulation tends towards self-preservation, all fear tends towards a comprehension of the final ending.

There is an old fable about seven blind men who grabbed seven different parts of an elephant. One of them thought he had a snake, one of them thought he had a giant palm leaf, one of them thought he was touching a stone pillar. When they got together, they decided they had an elephant.

Fear is the emotion that makes us blind. How many things are we afraid of? We're afraid to turn off the lights when our hands are wet. We're afraid to stick a knife into the toaster to get the stuck English muffin without unplugging it first. We're afraid of what the doctor may tell us when the physical exam is over; when the airplane suddenly takes a great unearthly lurch in mid-air. We're afraid that the oil may run out, that the good air will run out, the good water, the good life. When the daughter promised to be in by eleven and it's now quarter past twelve and sleet is spattering against the window like dry sand, we sit and pretend to watch Johnny Carson and look occasionally at the mute telephone and we feel the emotion that makes us blind, the emotion that makes a stealthy ruin of the thinking process.

The infant is a fearless creature only until the first time the mother isn't there to pop the nipple into his mouth when he cries. The toddler quickly discovers the blunt and painful truths of the slamming door, the hot burner, the fever that goes with the croup or the measles. Children learn fear quickly; they pick it up off the mother's or father's face when the parent comes into the bathroom and sees them with the bottle of pills or the safety razor.

Fear makes us blind, and we touch each fear with all the avid curiosity of self-interest, trying to make a whole out of

a hundred parts, like the blind men with their elephant.

We sense the shape. Children grasp it easily, forget it, and relearn it as adults. The shape is there, and most of us come to realize what it is sooner or later: it is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add up to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear – an arm, a leg, a finger, an ear. We're afraid of the body under the sheet. It's our body. And the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths.

The field has never been highly regarded; for a long time the only friends that Poe and Lovecraft had were the French, who have somehow come to an arrangement with both sex and death, an arrangement that Poe and Lovecraft's fellow Americans certainly had no patience with. The Americans were busy building railroads, and Poe and Lovecraft died broke. Tolkien's Middle-Earth fantasy went kicking around for twenty years before it became an aboveground success, and Kurt Vonnegut, whose books so often deal with the death-rehearsal idea, has faced a steady wind of criticism, much of it mounting to hysterical pitch.

It may be because the horror writer always brings bad news: you're going to die, he says; he's telling you to never mind Oral Roberts and his 'something *good* is going to happen to *you*', because something *bad* is also going to happen to *you*, and it may be cancer and it may be a stroke, and it may be a car accident, but it's going to happen. And he takes your hand and he enfolds it in his own and he takes you into the room and he puts your hands on the shape under the sheet . . . and tells you to touch it here . . . here . . . and *here* . . .

Of course, the subjects of death and fear are not the horror writer's exclusive province. Plenty of so-called 'mainstream' writers have dealt with these themes, and in a variety of different ways – from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of*

*Virginia Woolf*? to Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer stories. Fear has always been big. Death has always been big. They are two of the human constants. But only the writer of horror and the supernatural gives the reader such an opportunity for total identification and catharsis. Those working in the genre with even the faintest understanding of what they are doing know that the entire field of horror and the supernatural is a kind of filter screen between the conscious and the subconscious; horror fiction is like a central subway station in the human psyche between the blue line of what we can safely internalize and the red line of what we need to get rid of in some way or another.

When you read horror, you don't really believe what you read. You don't believe in vampires, werewolves, trucks that suddenly start up and drive themselves. The horrors that we all do believe in are of the sort that Dostoyevsky and Albee and MacDonald write about: hate, alienation, growing lovelessly old, tottering out into a hostile world on the unsteady legs of adolescence. We are, in our real everyday worlds, often like the masks of Comedy and Tragedy, grinning on the outside, grimacing on the inside. There's a central switching point somewhere inside, a transformer, maybe, where the wires leading from those two masks connect. And that is the place where the horror story so often hits home.

The horror-story writer is not so different from the Welsh sin-eater, who was supposed to take upon himself the sins of the dear departed by partaking of the dear departed's food. The tale of monstrosity and terror is a basket loosely packed with phobias; when the writer passes by, you take one of his imaginary horrors out of the basket and put one of your real ones in – at least for a time.

Back in the 1950s there was a tremendous surge of giant bug movies – *Them!*, *The Beginning of the End*, *The Deadly Mantis*, and so on. Almost without fail, as the movie progressed, we found out that these gigantic, ugly mutants were the results of A-bomb tests in New Mexico or on

deserted Pacific atolls (and in the more recent *Horror of Party Beach*, which might have been subtitled *Beach Blanket Armageddon*, the culprit was nuclear-reactor waste). Taken together, the big-bug movies form an undeniable pattern, an uneasy gestalt of a whole country's terror of the new age that the Manhattan Project had rung in. Later in the fifties there was a cycle of 'teen-age' horror movies, beginning with such epics as *Teen-Agers from Outer Space* and *The Blob*, in which a beardless Steve McQueen battled a sort of Jell-O mutant with the help of his teen-aged friends. In an age when every weekly magazine contained at least one article on the rising tide of juvenile delinquency, the teen-ager fright films expressed a whole country's uneasiness with the youth revolution even then brewing; when you saw Michael Landon turn into a werewolf in a high-school leather jacket, a connection happened between the fantasy on the screen and your own floating anxieties about the nerd in the hot rod that your daughter was dating. To the teen-agers themselves (I was one of them and speak from experience), the monsters spawned in the leased American-International studios gave them a chance to see someone even uglier than they felt themselves to be; what were a few pimples compared to the shambling *thing* that used to be a high-school kid in *I Was a Teen-Age Frankenstein*? This same cycle also expressed the teen-agers' own feeling that they were being unfairly put upon and put down by their elders, that their parents just 'did not understand'. The movies are formulaic (as so much of horror fiction is, written or filmed), and what the formula expresses most clearly is a whole generation's paranoia – a paranoia no doubt caused in part by all the articles their parents were reading. In the films, some terrible, warty horror is menacing Elmville. The kids know, because the flying saucer landed near lovers' lane. In the first reel, the warty horror kills an old man in a pickup truck (the old man was unfailingly played by Elisha Cook, Jr.). In the next three reels, the kids try to convince their elders that the

warty horror is indeed slinking around. 'Get outta here before I lock you all up for violating the curfew!' Elmville's police chief growls just before the monster slithers down Main Street, laying waste in all directions. In the end it is the quick-thinking kids who put an end to the warty horror, and then go off to the local hangout to suck up chocolate malteds and jitterbug to some forgettable tune as the end credits run.

That's three separate opportunities for catharsis in one cycle of movies – not bad for a bunch of low-budget epics that were usually done in under ten days. It didn't happen because the writers and producers and directors of those films wanted it to happen; it happened because the horror tale lives most naturally at that connection point between the conscious and the sub-conscious, the place where both image and allegory occur most naturally and with the most devastating effect. There is a direct line of evolution between *I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf* and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and between *Teen-Age Monster* and Brian De Palma's film *Carrie*.

Great horror fiction is almost always allegorical; sometimes the allegory is intended, as in *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and sometimes it just happens – J. R. R. Tolkien swore up and down that the Dark Lord of Mordor was not Hitler in fantasy dress, but the theses and term papers to just that effect go on and on . . . maybe because, as Bob Dylan says, when you got a lot of knives and forks, you gotta cut something.

The works of Edward Albee, of Steinbeck, Camus, Faulkner – they deal with fear and death, sometimes with horror, but usually these mainstream writers deal with it in a more normal, real-life way. Their work is set in the frame of a rational world; they are stories that 'could happen'. They are on that subway line that runs through the external world. There are other writers – James Joyce, Faulkner again, poets such as T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton – whose work is set in the land of the symbolic

unconsciousness. They are on the subway line running into the internal landscape. But the horror writer is almost always at the terminal joining the two, at least if he is on the mark. When he is at his best we often have that weird sensation of being not quite asleep or awake, when time stretches and skews, when we can hear voices but cannot make out the words or the intent, when the dream seems real and the reality dreamlike.

That is a strange and wonderful terminal. Hill House is there, in that place where the trains run both ways, with its doors that swing sensibly shut; the woman in the room with the yellow wallpaper is there, crawling along the floor with her head pressed against that faint grease mark; the barrow-wights that menaced Frodo and Sam are there; and Pickman's model; the wendigo; Norman Bates and his terrible mother. No waking or dreaming in this terminal, but only the voice of the writer, low and rational, talking about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unravelling with shocking suddenness. He's telling you that you want to see the car accident, and yes, he's right – you do. There's a dead voice on the phone . . . something behind the walls of the old house that sounds bigger than a rat . . . movement at the foot of the cellar stairs. He wants you to see all of those things, and more; he wants you to put your hands on the shape under the sheet. And you want to put your hands there. Yes.

These are some of the things I feel that the horror story does, but I am firmly convinced that it must do one more thing, this above all others: It must tell a tale that holds the reader or the listener spellbound for a little while, lost in a world that never was, never could be. It must be like the wedding guest that stoppeth one of three. All my life as a writer I have been committed to the idea that in fiction the story value holds dominance over every other facet of the writer's craft; characterization, theme, mood, none of

those things is anything if the story is dull. And if the story does hold you, all else can be forgiven. My favourite line to that effect came from the pen of Edgar Rice Burroughs, no one's candidate for Great World Writer, but a man who understood story values completely. On page one of *The Land That Time Forgot*, the narrator finds a manuscript in a bottle; the rest of the novel is the presentation of that manuscript. The narrator says, 'Read one page, and I will be forgotten.' It's a pledge that Burroughs makes good on – many writers with talents greater than his have not.

In fine, gentle reader, here is a truth that makes the strongest writer gnash his teeth: with the exception of three small groups of people, no one reads a writer's preface. The exceptions are: one, the writer's close family (usually his wife and his mother); two, the writer's accredited representative (and the editorial people and assorted munchkins), whose chief interest is to find out if anyone has been libelled in the course of the writer's wanderings; and three, those people who have had a hand in helping the writer on his way. These are the people who want to know whether or not the writer's head has gotten so big that he has managed to forget that he didn't do it by himself.

Other readers are apt to feel, with perfect justification, that the author's preface is a gross imposition, a multi-page commercial for himself, even more offensive than the cigarette ads that have proliferated in the centre section of the paperback books. Most readers come to see the show, not to watch the stage manager take bows in front of the footlights. Again, with perfect justification.

I'm leaving now. The show is going to start soon. We're going to go into that room and touch the shape under the sheet. But before I leave, I want to take just two or three more minutes of your time to thank some people from each of the three groups above – and from a fourth. Bear with me as I say a few thank-you's:

To my wife, Tabitha, my best and most trenchant critic. When she feels the work is good, she says so; when she feels I've put my foot in it, she sets me on my ass as kindly and lovingly as possible. To my kids, Naomi, Joe, and Owen, who have been very understanding about their father's peculiar doings in the downstairs room. And to my mother, who died in 1973, and to whom this book is dedicated. Her encouragement was steady and unwavering, she always seemed able to find forty or fifty cents for the obligatory stamped, self-addressed return envelope, and no one – including myself – was more pleased than she when I 'broke through'.

In that second group, particular thanks are due my editor, William G. Thompson of Doubleday & Company, who has worked with me patiently, who has suffered my daily phone calls with constant good cheer, and who showed kindness to a young writer with no credentials some years ago, and who has stuck with that writer since then.

In the third group are the people who first bought my work: Mr Robert A. W. Lowndes, who purchased the first two stories I ever sold; Mr Douglas Allen and Mr Nye Willden of the Dugent Publishing Corporation, who bought so many of the ones that followed for *Cavalier* and *Gent*, back in the scuffling days when the cheques sometimes came just in time to avoid what the power companies euphemistically call 'an interruption in service'; to Elaine Geiger and Herbert Schnall and Carolyn Stromberg of the New American Library; to Gerard Van der Leun of *Penthouse* and Harris Deinstfrey of *Cosmopolitan*. Thanks to all of you.

There's one final group that I'd like to thank, and that is each and every reader who ever unlimbered his or her wallet to buy something that I wrote. In a great many ways, this is your book because it sure never would have happened without you. So thanks.

Where I am, it's still dark and raining. We've got a fine

night for it. There's something I want to show you, something I want you to touch. It's in a room not far from here – in fact, it's almost as close as the next page.

Shall we go?

*Bridgton, Maine*  
27 February 1977



# NIGHT SHIFT



## JERUSALEM'S LOT

2 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

How good it was to step into the cold, draughty hall here at Chapelwaite, every bone in an ache from that abominable coach, in need of instant relief from my distended bladder – and to see a letter addressed in your own inimitable scrawl propped on the obscene little cherry-wood table beside the door! Be assured that I set to deciphering it as soon as the needs of the body were attended to (in a coldly ornate downstairs bathroom where I could see my breath rising before my eyes).

I'm glad to hear that you are recovered from the *miasma* that has so long set in your lungs, although I assure you that I do sympathize with the moral dilemma the cure has affected you with. An ailing abolitionist healed by the sunny climes of slavestruck Florida! Still and all, Bones, I ask you as a friend who has also walked in the valley of the shadow, *to take all care of yourself* and venture not back to Massachusetts until your body gives you leave. Your fine mind and incisive pen cannot serve us if you are clay, and if the Southern zone is a healing one, is there not poetic justice in that?

Yes, the house is quite as fine as I had been led to believe by my cousin's executors, but rather more sinister. It sits atop a huge and jutting point of land perhaps three miles north of Falmouth and nine miles north of Portland. Be-

hind it are some four acres of grounds, gone back to the wild in the most formidable manner imaginable - junipers, scrub vines, bushes, and various forms of creeper climb wildly over the picturesque stone walls that separate the estate from the town domain. Awful imitations of Greek statuary peer blindly through the wrack from atop various hillocks - they seem, in most cases, about to lunge at the passer-by. My cousin Stephen's tastes seem to have run the gamut from the unacceptable to the downright horrific. There is an odd little summer house which has been nearly buried in scarlet sumac and a grotesque sundial in the midst of what must once have been a garden. It adds the final lunatic touch.

But the view from the parlour more than excuses this; I command a dizzying view of the rocks at the foot of Chapelwaite Head and the Atlantic itself. A huge, bellied bay window looks out on this, and a huge, toadlike secretary stands beside it. It will do nicely for the start of that novel which I have talked of so long [and no doubt tiresomely].

Today has been grey with occasional splatters of rain. As I look out all seems to be a study in slate - the rocks, old and worn as Time itself, the sky, and of course the sea, which crashes against the granite fangs below with a sound which is not precisely sound but vibration - I can feel the waves with my feet even as I write. The sensation is not a wholly unpleasant one.

I know you disapprove my solitary habits, dear Bones, but I assure you that I am fine and happy. Calvin is with me, as practical, silent, and as dependable as ever, and by midweek I am sure that between the two of us we shall have straightened our affairs and made arrangements for necessary deliveries from town - and a company of cleaning women to begin blowing the dust from this place!

I will close - there are so many things as yet to be seen, rooms to explore, and doubtless a thousand pieces of execrable furniture to be viewed by these tender eyes.

Once again, my thanks for the touch of familiar brought by your letter, and for your continuing regard.

Give my love to your wife, as you both have mine.

CHARLES

6 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

Such a place this is!

It continues to amaze me – as do the reactions of the townfolk in the closest village to my occupancy. That is a queer little place with the picturesque name of Preacher's Corners. It was there that Calvin contracted for the weekly provisions. The other errand, that of securing a sufficient supply of cordwood for the winter, was likewise taken care of. But Cal returned with gloomy countenance, and when I asked him what the trouble was, he replied grimly enough:

'They think you mad, Mr Boone!'

I laughed and said that perhaps they had heard of the brain fever I suffered after my Sarah died – certainly I spoke madly enough at that time, as you could attest.

But Cal protested that no one knew anything of me except through my cousin Stephen, who contracted for the same services as I have now made provision for. 'What was said, sir, was that anyone who would live in Chapelwaite must be either a lunatic or run the risk of becoming one.'

This left me utterly perplexed, as you may imagine, and I asked who had given him this amazing communication. He told me that he had been referred to a sullen and rather besotted pulp-logger named Thompson, who owns four hundred acres of pine, birch, and spruce, and who logs it with the help of his five sons, for sale to the Mills in Portland and to householders in the immediate area.

When Cal, all unknowing of his queer prejudice, gave him the location to which the wood was to be brought, this Thompson stared at him with his mouth ajaw and said that he would send his sons with the wood, in the good light of the day, and by the sea road.

Calvin, apparently misreading my bemusement for distress, hastened to say that the man reeked of cheap whiskey and that he had then lapsed into some kind of nonsense about a deserted village and cousin Stephen's relations – and worms! Calvin finished his business with one of Thompson's boys, who, I take it, was rather surly and none too sober or freshly-scented himself. I take it there has been some of this reaction in Preacher's Corners itself, at the general store where Cal spoke with the shop-keeper, although this was more of the gossipy, behind-the-hand type.

None of this has bothered me much; we know how rustics dearly love to enrich their lives with the smell of scandal and myth, and I suppose poor Stephen and his side of the family are fair game. As I told Cal, a man who has fallen to his death almost from his own front porch is more than likely to stir talk.

The house itself is a constant amazement. Twenty-three rooms, Bones! The wainscoting which panels the upper floors and the portrait gallery is mildewed but still stout. While I stood in my late cousin's upstairs bedroom I could hear the rats scuttering behind it, and big ones they must be, from the sound they make – almost like people walking there. I should hate to encounter one in the dark; or even in the light, for that matter. Still, I have noted neither holes nor droppings. Odd.

The upper gallery is lined with bad portraits in frames which must be worth a fortune. Some bear a resemblance to Stephen as I remember him. I believe I have correctly identified my Uncle Henry Boone and his wife Judith; the others are unfamiliar. I suppose one of them may be my own notorious grandfather, Robert. But Stephen's side of the family is all but unknown to me, for which I am heartily sorry. The same good humour that shone in Stephen's letters to Sarah and me, the same light of high intellect, shines in these portraits, bad as they are. For what foolish reasons families fall out! A rifled *escritoire*, hard words

between brothers now dead three generations, and blameless descendants are needlessly estranged. I cannot help reflecting upon how fortunate it was that you and John Petty succeeded in contacting Stephen when it seemed I might follow my Sarah through the Gates – and upon how unfortunate it was that chance should have robbed us of a face-to-face meeting. How I would have loved to hear him defend the ancestral statuary and furnishings!

But do not let me denigrate the place to an extreme. Stephen's taste was not my own, true, but beneath the veneer of his additions there are pieces [a number of them shrouded by dust-covers in the upper chambers] which are true masterworks. There are beds, tables, and heavy, dark scrollings done in teak and mahogany, and many of the bedrooms and receiving chambers, the upper study and small parlour, hold a sombre charm. The floors are rich pine that glow with an inner and secret light. There is dignity here; dignity and the weight of years. I cannot yet say I like it, but I do respect it. I am eager to watch it change as we revolve through the changes of this northern clime.

Lord, I run on! Write soon, Bones. Tell me what progress you make, and what news you hear from Petty and the rest. And please do not make the mistake of trying to persuade any new Southern acquaintances as to your views *too forcibly* – I understand that not all are content to answer merely with their mouths, as is our long-winded *friend*, Mr Calhoun.

Yr. affectionate friend,  
CHARLES

16 October 1850

DEAR RICHARD,

Hello, and how are you? I have thought about you often since I have taken up residence here at Chapelwaite, and had half expected to hear from you – and now I receive a letter from Bones telling me that I'd forgotten to leave my address at the club! Rest assured that I would have written

eventually anyway, as it sometimes seems that my true and loyal friends are all I have left in the world that is sure and completely normal. And, Lord, how spread we've become! You in Boston, writing faithfully for *The Liberator* [to which I have also sent my address, incidentally], Hanson in England on another of his confounded *jaunts*, and poor old Bones in the very *lions' lair*, recovering his lungs.

It goes as well as can be expected here, Dick, and be assured I will render you a full account when I am not quite as pressed by certain events which are extant here - I think your legal mind may be quite intrigued by certain happenings at Chapelwaite and in the area about it.

But in the meantime I have a favour to ask, if you will entertain it. Do you remember the historian you introduced me to at Mr Clary's fund-raising dinner for the cause? I believe his name was Bigelow. At any rate, he mentioned that he made a hobby of collecting odd bits of historical lore which pertained to the very area in which I am now living. My favour, then, is this: Would you contact him and ask him what facts, bits of folklore, or *general rumour* - if any - he may be conversant with about a small, deserted village called JERUSALEM'S LOT, near a township called Preacher's Corners, on the Royal River? The stream itself is a tributary of the Androscoggin, and flows into that river approximately eleven miles above that river's emptying place near Chapelwaite. It would gratify me intensely, and, more important, may be a matter of some moment.

In looking over this letter I feel I have been a bit short with you, Dick, for which I am heartily sorry. But be assured I will explain myself shortly, and until that time I send my warmest regards to your wife, two fine sons, and, of course, to yourself.

Yr. affectionate friend,  
CHARLES

16 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

I have a tale to tell you which seems a little strange [and even disquieting] to both Cal and me – see what you think. If nothing else, it may serve to amuse you while you battle the mosquitoes!

Two days after I mailed my last to you, a group of four young ladies arrived from the Corners under the supervision of an elderly lady of intimidatingly competent visage named Mrs Cloris, to set the place in order and to remove some of the dust that had been causing me to sneeze seemingly at every other step. They all seemed a little nervous as they went about their chores; indeed, one flighty miss uttered a small screeth when I entered the upstairs parlour as she dusted.

I asked Mrs Cloris about this [she was dusting the downstairs hall with grim determination that would have quite amazed you, her hair done up in an old faded bandannal], and she turned to me and said with an air of determination: 'They don't like the house, and I don't like the house, sir, because it has always been a *bad* house.'

My jaw dropped at this unexpected bit, and she went on in a kindlier tone: 'I do not mean to say that Stephen Boone was not a fine man, for he was; I cleaned for him every second Thursday all the time he was here, as I cleaned for his father, Mr Randolph Boone, until he and his wife disappeared in eighteen and sixteen. Mr Stephen was a good and kindly man, and so you seem, sir (if you will pardon my bluntness; I know no other way to speak), but the house is *bad* and it always *has been*, and no Boone has ever been happy here since your grandfather Robert and his brother Philip fell out over stolen [and here she paused, almost guiltily] items in seventeen and eighty-nine.'

Such memories these folks have, Bones!

Mrs Cloris continued: 'The house was built in unhappiness, has been lived in with unhappiness, there has been

blood spilt on its floors [as you may or may not know, Bones, my Uncle Randolph was involved in an accident on the cellar stairs which took the life of his daughter Marcella; he then took his own life in a fit of remorse. The incident is related in one of Stephen's letters to me, on the sad occasion of his dead sister's birthday], there has been disappearance and accident.

'I have worked here, Mr Boone, and I am neither blind nor deaf. I've heard awful sounds in the walls, sir, awful sounds – thumpings and crashings and once a strange wailing that was half-laughter. It fair made my blood curdle. It's a dark place, sir.' And there she halted, perhaps afraid she had spoken too much.

As for myself, I hardly knew whether to be offended or amused, curious or merely matter-of-fact. I'm afraid that amusement won the day. 'And what do you suspect, Mrs Cloris? Ghosts rattling chains?'

But she only looked at me oddly. 'Ghosts there may be. But it's not ghosts in the walls. It's not ghosts that wail and blubber like the damned and crash and blunder away in the darkness. It's –'

'Come, Mrs Cloris,' I prompted her. 'You've come this far. Now can you finish what you've begun?'

The strangest expression of terror, pique, and – I would swear to it – religious awe passed over her face. 'Some die not' she whispered. 'Some live in the twilight shadows Between to serve – Him!'

And that was the end. For some minutes I continued to tax her, but she grew only more obstinate and would say no more. At last I desisted, fearing she might gather herself up and quit the premises.

This is the end of one episode, but a second occurred the following evening. Calvin had laid a fire downstairs and I was sitting in the living-room, drowsing over a copy of *The Intelligencer* and listening to the sound of wind-driven rain on the large bay window. I felt comfortable as only one can on such a night, when all is miserable outside and all is

warmth and comfort inside; but a moment later Cal appeared at the door, looking excited and a bit nervous.

'Are you awake, sir?' he asked.

'Barely,' I said. 'What is it?'

'I've found something upstairs I think you should see,' he responded, with the same air of suppressed excitement.

I got up and followed him. As we climbed the wide stairs, Calvin said: 'I was reading a book in the upstairs study – a rather strange one – when I heard a noise in the wall.'

'Rats,' I said. 'Is that all?'

He paused on the landing, looking at me solemnly. The lamp he held cast weird, lurking shadows on the dark draperies and on the half-seen portraits that seemed now to leer rather than smile. Outside the wind rose to a brief scream and then subsided grudgingly.

'Not rats,' Cal said. 'There was a kind of blundering, thudding sound from behind the book-cases, and then a horrible gurgling – horrible, sir. And scratching, as if something were struggling to get out . . . to get at me!'

You can imagine my amazement, Bones. Calvin is not the type to give way to hysterical flights of imagination. It began to seem that there was a mystery here after all – and perhaps an ugly one indeed.

'What then?' I asked him. We had resumed down the hall, and I could see the light from the study spilling forth on to the floor of the gallery. I viewed it with some trepidation; the night seemed no longer comfortable.

The scratching noise stopped. After a moment the thudding, shuffling sounds began again, this time moving away from me. I paused once, and I swear I heard a strange, almost inaudible laugh! I went to the book-case and began to push and pull, thinking there might be a partition, or a secret door.'

'You found one?'

Cal paused at the door to the study. 'No – but I found this!'

We stepped in and I saw a square black hole in the left case. The books at that point were nothing but dummies, and what Cal had found was a small hiding place. I flashed my lamp within it and saw nothing but a thick fall of dust, dust which must have been decades old.

'There was only this,' Cal said quietly, and handed me a yellowed foolscap. The thing was a map, drawn in spider-thin strokes of black ink – the map of a town or village. There were perhaps seven buildings, and one, clearly marked with a steeple, bore this legend beneath it: *The Worm That Doth Corrupt.*

In the upper left corner, to what would have been the north-west of this little village, an arrow pointed. Inscribed beneath it: *Chapelwaite.*

Calvin said: 'In town, sir, someone rather superstitiously mentioned a deserted village called Jerusalem's Lot. It's a place they steer clear of.'

'But this?' I asked, fingering the odd legend below the steeple.

'I don't know.'

A memory of Mrs Cloris, adamant yet fearful, passed through my mind. 'The Worm . . .' I muttered.

'Do you know something, Mr Boone?'

'Perhaps . . . it might be amusing to have a look for this town tomorrow, do you think, Cal?'

He nodded, eyes lighting. We spent almost an hour after this looking for some breach in the wall behind the cubby-hole Cal had found, but with no success. Nor was there a recurrence of the noises Cal had described.

We retired with no further adventure that night.

On the following morning Calvin and I set out on our ramble through the woods. The rain of the night before had ceased, but the sky was sombre and lowering. I could see Cal looking at me with some doubtfulness and I hastened to reassure him that should I tire, or the journey prove too far, I would not hesitate to call a halt to the affair. We had equipped ourselves with a picnic lunch, a fine Buckwhite

compass, and, of course, the odd and ancient map of Jerusalem's Lot.

It was a strange and brooding day; not a bird seemed to sing nor an animal to move as we made our way through the great and gloomy stands of pine to the south and east. The only sounds were those of our own feet and the steady pound of the Atlantic against the headlands. The smell of the sea, almost preternaturally heavy, was our constant companion.

We had gone no more than two miles when we struck an overgrown road of what I believe were once called the 'corduroy' variety; this tended in our general direction and we struck off along it, making brisk time. We spoke little. The day, with its still and ominous quality, weighed heavily on our spirits.

At about eleven o'clock we heard the sound of rushing water. The remnant of road took a hard turn to the left, and on the other side of a boiling, slaty little stream, like an apparition, was Jerusalem's Lot!

The stream was perhaps eight feet across, spanned by a moss-grown footbridge. On the far side, Bones, stood the most perfect little village you might imagine, understandably weathered, but amazingly preserved. Several houses, done in that austere yet commanding form for which the Puritans were justly famous, stood clustered near the steeply-sheared bank. Further beyond, along a weed-grown thoroughfare, stood three or four of what might have been primitive business establishments, and beyond that, the spire of the church marked on the map, rising up to the grey sky and looking grim beyond description with its peeled paint and tarnished, leaning cross.

'The town is well named,' Can said softly beside me.

We crossed to the town and began to poke through it – and this is where my story grows slightly amazing, Bones, so prepare yourself!

The air seemed leaden as we walked among the buildings; weighted, if you will. The edifices were in a state of

decay – shutters torn off, roofs crumbled under the weight of heavy snows gone by, windows dusty and leering. Shadows from odd corners and warped angles seemed to sit in sinister pools.

We entered an old and rotting tavern first – somehow it did not seem right that we should invade any of those houses to which people had retired when they wished privacy. An old and weather-scrubbed sign above the splintered door announced that this had been the BOAR'S HEAD INN AND TAVERN. The door creaked hellishly on its one remaining hinge, and we stepped into the shadowed interior. The smell of rot and mould was vaporous and nearly overpowering. And beneath it seemed to lie an even deeper smell, a slimy and pestiferous smell, a smell of ages and the decay of ages. Such a stench as might issue from corrupt coffins or violated tombs. I held my handkerchief to my nose and Cal did likewise. We surveyed the place.

'My God, sir –' Cal said faintly.

'It's never been touched,' I finished for him.

As indeed it had not. Tables and chairs stood about like ghostly guardians of the watch, dusty, warped by the extreme changes in temperature which the new England climate is known for, but otherwise perfect – as if they had waited through the silent, echoing decades for those long gone to enter once more, to call for a pint or a dram, to deal cards and light clay pipes. A small square mirror hung beside the rules of the tavern, *unbroken*. Do you see the significance, Bones? Small boys are noted for exploration and vandalism; there is not a 'haunted' house which stands with windows intact, no matter how fearsome the eldritch inhabitants are rumoured to be; not a shadowy graveyard without at least one tombstone upended by young pranksters. Certainly there must be a score of young pranksters in Preacher's Corners, not two miles from Jerusalem's Lot. Yet the inn-keeper's glass [which must have cost him a nice sum] was intact – as were the other fragile items we found in our pokings. The only damage in Jerusalem's Lot has been

done by impersonal Nature. The implication is obvious: Jerusalem's Lot is a shunned town. But why? I have a notion, but before I even dare hint at it, I must proceed to the unsettling conclusion of our visit.

We went up to the sleeping quarters and found beds made up, pewter water-pitchers neatly placed beside them. The kitchen was likewise untouched by anything save the dust of the years and that horrible, sunken stench of decay. The tavern alone would be an antiquarian's paradise; the wondrously queer kitchen stove alone would fetch a pretty price at Boston auction.

'What do you think, Cal?' I asked when we had emerged again into the uncertain daylight.

'I think it's bad business, Mr Boone,' he replied in his doleful way, 'and that we must see more to know more.'

We gave the other shops scant notice – there was a hostelry with mouldering leather goods still hung on rusted flatnails, a chandler's, a warehouse with oak and pine still stacked within, a smithy.

We entered two houses as we made our way towards the church at the centre of the village. Both were perfectly in the Puritan mode, full of items a collector would give his arm for, both deserted and full of the same rotten scent.

Nothing seemed to live or move in all of this but ourselves. We saw no insects, no birds, not even a cobweb fashioned in a window corner. Only dust.

At last we reached the church. It reared above us, grim, uninviting, cold. Its windows were black with the shadows inside, and any Godliness or sanctity had departed from it long ago. Of that I am certain. We mounted the steps, and I placed my hand on the large iron door-pull. A set, dark look passed from myself to Calvin and back again. I opened the portal. How long since that door had been touched? I would say with confidence that mine was the first in fifty years; perhaps longer. Rust-clogged hinges screamed as I opened it. The smell of rot and decay which smote us was

nearly palpable. Cal made a gagging sound in his throat and twisted his head involuntarily for clearer air.

'Sir,' he asked, 'are you sure that you are - ?'

'I'm fine,' I said calmly. But I did not feel calm, Bones, no more than I do now, I believe, with Moses, with Jeroboam, with Increase Mather, and with our own Hanson [when he is in a philosophical *temperament*], that there are spiritually noxious places, buildings where the milk of the cosmos has become sour and rancid. This church is such a place; I would swear to it.

We stepped into a long vestibule equipped with a dusty coat rack and shelved hymnals. It was windowless. Oil-lamps stood in niches here and there. An unremarkable room I thought, until I heard Calvin's sharp gasp and saw what he had already noticed.

It was an obscenity.

I daren't describe that elaborately-framed picture further than this: that it was done after the fleshy style of Rubens; that it contained a grotesque travesty of a madonna and child; that strange, half-shadowed creatures sported and crawled in the background.

'Lord,' I whispered.

'There's no Lord here,' Calvin said, and his words seemed to hang in the air. I opened the door leading into the church itself, and the odour became a miasma, nearly overpowering.

In the glimmering half-light of afternoon the pews stretched ghostlike to the altar. Above them was a high, oaken pulpit and a shadow-struck narthex from which gold glimmered.

With a half-sob Calvin, that devout Protestant, made the Holy Sign, and I followed suit. For the gold was a large, beautifully-wrought cross - but it was hung upside-down, symbol of Satan's Mass.

'We must be calm,' I heard myself saying. 'We must be calm, Calvin. We must be calm.'

But a shadow had touched my heart, and I was afraid as I

had never been. I have walked beneath death's umbrella and thought there was none darker. But there is. There is.

We walked down the aisle, our footfalls echoing above and around us. We left tracks in the dust. And at the altar there were other tenebrous *objets d'art*. I will not, cannot, let my mind dwell upon them.

I began to mount to the pulpit itself.

'Don't Mr Boone!' Cal cried suddenly. 'I'm afraid -'

But I had gained it. A huge book lay open upon the stand, writ both in Latin and crabbed runes which looked, to my unpractised eye, either Druidic or pre-Celtic. I enclose a card with several of the symbols, redrawn from memory.

I closed the book and looked at the words stamped into the leather: *De Vermis Mysteriis*. My Latin is rusty, but serviceable enough to translate: *The Mysteries of the Worm*.

As I touched it, that accursed church and Calvin's white, upturned face seemed to swim before me. It seemed that I heard low, chanting voices, full of hideous yet eager fear – and below that sound, another, filling the bowels of the earth. An hallucination, I doubt it not – but at the same moment, the church was filled with a very real sound, which I can only describe as a huge and macabre *turning* beneath my feet. The pulpit trembled beneath my fingers; the desecrated cross trembled on the wall.

We exited together, Cal and I, leaving the place to its own darkness, and neither of us dared look back until we had crossed the rude planks spanning the stream. I will not say we defiled the nineteen hundred years man has spent climbing upwards from a hunkering and superstitious savage by actually running; but I would be a liar to say that we strolled.

That is my tale. You mustn't shadow your recovery by fearing that the fever has touched me again; Cal can attest to all in these pages, up to and including the hideous *noise*.

So I close, saying only that I wish I might see you

[knowing that much of my bewilderment would drop away immediately], and that I remain your friend and admirer,

CHARLES

17 October 1850

DEAR GENTLEMEN:

In the most recent edition of your catalogue of household items (i.e., Summer, 1850), I noticed a preparation which is titled Rat's Bane. I should like to purchase one (1) 5-pound tin of this preparation at your stated price of thirty cents (\$.30). I enclose return postage. Please mail to: Calvin McCann, Chapelwaite, Preacher's Corners, Cumberland County, Maine.

Thank you for your attention in this matter.

I remain, dear Gentlemen,  
CALVIN McCANN

19 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

Developments of a disquieting nature.

The noises in the house have intensified, and I am growing more to the conclusion that rats are not all that move within our walls. Calvin and I went on another fruitless search for hidden crannies or passages, but found nothing. How poorly we would fit into one of Mrs Radcliffe's romances! Cal claims, however, that much of the sound emanates from the cellar, and it is there we intend to explore tomorrow. It makes me no easier to know that Cousin Stephen's sister met her unfortunate end there.

Her portrait, by the by, hangs in the upstairs gallery. Marcella Boone was a sadly pretty thing, if the artist got her right, and I do know she never married. At times I think that Mrs Cloris was right, that it *is* a bad house. It has certainly held nothing but gloom for its past inhabitants.

But I have more to say of the redoubtable Mrs Cloris, for I have had this day a second interview with her. As the most level-headed person from the Corners that I have met thus

far, I sought her out this afternoon, after an unpleasant interview which I will relate.

The wood was to have been delivered this morning, and when noon came and passed and no wood with it, I decided to take my daily walk into the town itself. My object was to visit Thompson, the man with whom Cal did business.

It has been a lovely day, full of the crisp snap of bright autumn, and by the time I reached the Thompsons' home-stead [Cal, who remained home to poke further through Uncle Stephen's library gave me adequate directions] I felt in the best mood that these last few days have seen, and quite prepared to forgive Thompson's tardiness with the wood.

The place was a massive tangle of weeds and fallen-down buildings in need of paint; to the left of the barn a huge sow, ready for November butchering, grunted and wallowed in a muddy sty, and in the littered yard between house and outbuildings a woman in a tattered gingham dress was feeding chickens from her apron. When I hailed her, she turned a pale and vapid face towards me.

The sudden change in expression from utter, doltish emptiness to one of frenzied terror was quite wonderful to behold. I can only think she took me for Stephen himself, for she raised her hand in the prong-fingered sign of the evil eye and screamed. The chicken-feed scattered on the ground and the fowls fluttered away, squawking.

Before I could utter a sound a huge, hulking figure of a man clad only in long-handled underwear lumbered out of the house with a squirrel-rifle in one hand and a jug in the other. From the red light in his eye and unsteady manner of walking, I judged that this was Thompson the Woodcutter himself.

'A Boone!' he roared. 'G—d—n your eyes!' He dropped the jug a-rolling and also made the Sign.

'I've come,' I said with as much equanimity as I could muster under the circumstances, 'because the wood has not. According to the agreement you struck with my man —'

'G—d—n your man too, say I!' And for the first time I noticed that beneath his bluff and bluster he was deadly afraid. I began seriously to wonder if he mightn't actually use his rifle against me in his excitement.

I began carefully: 'As a gesture of courtesy, you might —'  
'G—d—n your courtesy!'

'Very well, then,' I said with as much dignity as I could muster. 'I bid you good day until you are more in control of yourself.' And with this I turned away and began down the road to the village.

'Don'tchee come back!' he screamed after me. 'Stick wi' your evil up there! Cursed! Cursed! Cursed!' He pelted a stone at me, which struck my shoulder. I would not give him the satisfaction of dodging.

So I sought out Mrs Cloris, determined to solve the mystery of Thompson's enmity, at least. She is a widow [and none of your confounded *matchmaking*, Bones; she is easily fifteen years my senior, and I'll not see forty again] and lives by herself in a charming little cottage at the ocean's very doorstep. I found the lady hanging out her wash, and she seemed genuinely pleased to see me. I found this a great relief; it is vexing almost beyond words to be branded pariah for no understandable reason.

'Mr Boone,' said she, offering a half-curtsey. 'If you've come about washing, I take none in past September. My rheumatiz pains me so that it's trouble enough to do my own.'

'I wish laundry *was* the subject of my visit. I've come for help, Mrs Cloris. I must know all you can tell me about Chapelwaite and Jerusalem's Lot and why the townfolk regard me with such fear and suspicion!'

'Jerusalem's Lot! You know about *that*, then.'

'Yes,' I replied, 'and visited it with my companion a week ago.'

'God!' She went pale as milk, and tottered. I put out a hand to steady her. Her eyes rolled horribly, and for a moment I was sure she would swoon.

'Mrs Cloris, I am sorry if I have said anything to -'

'Come inside,' she said. 'You must know. Sweet Jesu, the evil days have come again!'

She would not speak more until she had brewed strong tea in her sunshiny kitchen. When it was before us, she looked pensively out at the ocean for a time. Inevitably, her eyes and mine were drawn to the jutting brow of Chapelwaite Head, where the house looked out over the water. The large bay window glittered in the rays of the westerling sun like a diamond. The view was beautiful but strangely disturbing. She suddenly turned to me and declared vehemently:

'Mr Boone, you must leave Chapelwaite immediately!'

I was flabbergasted.

'There has been an evil breath in the air since you took up residence. In the last week - since you set foot in the accursed place - there have been omens and portents. A caul over the face of the moon; flocks of whippoorwills which roost in the cemeteries; an unnatural birth. You *must* leave!'

When I found my tongue, I spoke as gently as I could. 'Mrs Cloris, these things are dreams. You must know that.'

'Is it a dream that Barbara Brown gave birth to a child with no eyes? Or that Clifton Brockett found a flat, pressed trail five feet wide in the woods beyond Chapelwaite *where all had withered and gone white*? And can you, who have visited Jerusalem's Lot, say with truth that nothing still lives there?'

I could not answer; the scene in that hideous church sprang before my eyes.

She clamped her gnarled hands together in an effort to calm herself. 'I know of these things only from my mother and her mother before her. Do you know the history of your family as it applies to Chapelwaite?'

'Vaguely,' I said. 'The house has been the home of Philip Boone's line since the 1780s; his brother Robert, my grand-

father, located in Massachusetts after an argument over stolen papers. Of Philip's side I know little, except that an unhappy shadow fell over it, extending from father to son to grandchildren – Marcella died in a tragic accident and Stephen fell to his death. It was his wish that Chapelwaite become the home of me and mine, and that the family rift thus be mended.'

'Never to be mended,' she whispered. 'You know nothing of the original quarrel?'

'Robert Boone was discovered rifling his brother's desk.'

'Philip Boone was mad,' she said. 'A man who trafficked with the unholy. The thing which Robert Boone *attempted* to remove was a profane Bible writ in the old tongues – Latin, Druidic, others. A hell-book.'

*'De Vermis Mysteriis.'*

She recoiled as if struck. 'You know of it?'

'I have seen it . . . touched it.' It seemed again she might swoon. A hand went to her mouth as if to stifle an outcry. 'Yes; in Jerusalem's Lot. On the pulpit of a corrupt and desecrated church.'

'Still there; still there, then.' She rocked in her chair. 'I had hoped God in His wisdom had cast it into the pit of hell.'

'What relation had Philip Boone to Jerusalem's Lot?'

'Blood relation,' she said darkly. 'The Mark of the Beast was on him, although he walked in the clothes of the Lamb. And on the night of 31 October 1789 Philip Boone disappeared . . . and the entire populace of that damned village with him.'

She would say little more; in fact, seemed to know little more. She would only reiterate her pleas that I leave, giving as reason something about 'blood calling to blood' and muttering about 'those who *watch* and those who *guard*'. As twilight drew on she seemed to grow more agitated rather than less, and to placate her I promised that her wishes would be taken under strong consideration.

I walked home through lengthening, gloomy shadows, my

good mood quite dissipated and my head spinning with questions which still plague me. Cal greeted me with the news that our noises in the walls have grown worse still – as I can attest at this moment. I try to tell myself that I hear only rats, but then I see the terrified, earnest face of Mrs Cloris.

The moon has risen over the sea, bloated, full, the colour of blood, staining the ocean with a noxious shade. My mind turns to that church again and

(here a line is struck out)

But you shall not see that, Bones. It is too mad. It is time I slept, I think. My thoughts go out to you.

Regards,  
CHARLES

(The following is from the pocket journal of Calvin McCann.)

20 October 1850

Took the liberty this morning of forcing the lock which binds the book closed; did it before Mr Boone arose. No help; it is all in cypher. A simple one, I believe. Perhaps I may break it as easily as the lock. A diary, I am certain the hand oddly like Mr Boone's own. Whose book, shelved in the most obscure corner of this library and locked across the pages? It seems old, but how to tell? The corrupting air has largely been kept from its pages. More later, if time; Mr Boone set upon looking about the cellar. Am afraid these dreadful goings-on will be too much for his chancy health yet. I must try to persuade him –

But he comes.

20 October 1850

BONES,

I can't write I cant [sic] write of this yet I I I

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

20 October 1850

As I had feared, his health has broken –  
Dear God, our Father Who art in Heaven!

Cannot bear to think of it; yet it is planted, burned on my  
brain like a tin-type; that horror in the cellar –!

Alone now; half-past eight o'clock; house silent but –

Found him swooned over his writing table; he still sleeps;  
yet for those few moments how nobly he acquitted himself  
while I stood paralyzed and shattered!

His skin is waxy, cool. Not the fever again, God be  
thanked. I daren't move him or leave him to go to the  
village. And if I did go, who would return with me to aid  
him? Who would come to this cursed house?

O, the cellar! The things in the cellar that have haunted  
our walls!

22 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

I am myself again, although weak, after thirty-six  
hours of unconsciousness. Myself again . . . what a grim  
and bitter joke! I shall never be myself again, never. I  
have come face to face with an insanity and a horror be-  
yond the limits of human expression. And the end is not  
yet.

If it were not for Cal, I believe I should end my life this  
minute. He is one island of sanity in all this madness.

You shall know it all.

We had equipped ourselves with candles for our cellar  
exploration, and they threw a strong glow that was quite  
adequate – hellishly adequate! Calvin tried to dissuade me,  
citing my recent illness, saying that the most we should  
probably find would be some healthy rats to mark for  
poisoning.

I remained determined, however; Calvin fetched a sigh  
and answered: 'Have it as you must, then, Mr Boone.'

The entrance to the cellar is by means of a trap in the

kitchen floor [which Cal assures me he has since stoutly boarded over], and we raised it only with a great deal of straining and lifting.

A fetid, overpowering smell came up out of the darkness, not unlike that which pervaded the deserted town across the Royal River. The candle I held shed its glow on a steeply-slanting flight of stairs leading down into darkness. They were in a terrible state of repair – in one place an entire riser missing, leaving only a black hole – and it was easy enough to see how the unfortunate Marcella might have come to her end there.

‘Be careful, Mr Boone!’ Cal said; I told him I had no intention of being anything but, and we made the descent.

The floor was earthen, the walls of stout granite, and hardly wet. The place did not look like a rat haven at all, for there were none of the things rats like to make their nests in, such as old boxes, discarded furniture, piles of paper, and the like. We lifted our candles, gaining a small circle of light, but still able to see little. The floor had a gradual slope which seemed to run beneath the main living-room and the dining-room – i.e., to the west. It was in this direction we walked. All was in utter silence. The stench in the air grew steadily stronger, and the dark about us seemed to press like wool, as if jealous of the light which had temporarily deposed it after so many years of undisputed dominion.

At the far end, the granite walls gave way to a polished wood which seemed totally black and without reflective properties. Here the cellar ended, leaving what seemed to be an alcove off the main chamber. It was positioned at an angle which made inspection impossible without stepping around the corner.

Calvin and I did so.

It was as if a rotten spectre of this dwelling’s sinister past had risen before us. A single chair stood in this alcove, and above it, fastened from a hook in one of the stout overhead beams, was a decayed noose of hemp.

'Then it was here that he hung himself,' Cal muttered.  
'God!'

'Yes . . . with the corpse of his daughter lying at the foot of the stairs behind him.'

Cal began to speak; then I saw his eyes jerked to a spot behind me; then his words became a scream.

How, Bones, can I describe the sight which fell upon our eyes? How can I tell you of the hideous tenants within our walls?

The far wall swung back, and from that darkness a face leered – a face with eyes as ebon as the Styx itself. Its mouth yawned in a toothless, agonized grin; one yellow, rotted hand stretched itself out to us. It made a hideous, mewling sound and took a shambling step forward. The light from my candle fell upon it –

*And I saw the livid rope-burn about its neck!*

From beyond it something else moved, something I shall dream of until the day when all dreams cease: a girl with a pallid, mouldering face and a corpse-grin; a girl whose head lolled at a lunatic angle.

They wanted us; I know it. And I know they would have drawn us into that darkness and made us their own, had I not thrown my candle directly at the thing in the partition, and followed it with the chair beneath that noose.

After that, all is confused darkness. My mind has drawn the curtain. I awoke, as I have said, in my room with Cal at my side.

If I could leave, I should fly from this house of horror with my nightdress flapping at my heels. But I cannot. I have become a pawn in a deeper, darker drama. Do not ask how I know; I only do. Mrs Cloris was right when she spoke of blood calling to blood; and how horribly right when she spoke of those who *watch* and those who *guard*. I fear that I have wakened a Force which has slept in the tenebrous village of 'Salem's Lot for half a century, a Force which has slain my ancestors and taken them in unholy bondage as *nosferatu* – the Undead. And I have greater fears than

these, Bones, but I still see only in part. If I knew . . . if I only knew all!

CHARLES

*Postscriptum* – And of course I write this only for myself; we are isolated from Preacher's Corner. I daren't carry my taint there to post this, and Calvin will not leave me. Perhaps, if God is good, this will reach you in some manner.

C.

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

23 October 1850

He is stronger today; we talked briefly of the *apparitions* in the cellar; agreed they were neither hallucinations nor of an *ectoplasmic* origin, but *real*. Does Mr Boone suspect, as I do, that they have gone? Perhaps; the noises are still; yet all is ominous yet, o'ercast with a dark pall. It seems we wait in the deceptive Eye of the Storm . . .

Have found a packet of papers in an upstairs bedroom, lying in the bottom drawer of an old roll-top desk. Some correspondence & receipted bills lead me to believe the room was Robert Boone's. Yet the most interesting document is a few jottings on the back of an advertisement for gentlemen's beaver hats. At the top is writ:

Blessed are the meek.

Below, the following apparent nonsense is writ:

b k e d s h d e r m t h e s e a k  
e l m s o e r a r e s h a m d e d

I believe 'tis the key of the locked and coded book in the library. The cypher above is certainly a rustic one used in the War for Independence known as the *Fence-Rail*. When one removes the 'nulls' from the second bit of scribble, the following is obtained:

Read up and down rather than across, the result is the original quotation from the Beatitudes.

Before I dare show this to Mr Boone, I must be sure of the book's contents . . .

24 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

An amazing occurrence – Cal, always close-mouthed until absolutely sure of himself [a rare and admirable human trait!], has found the diary of my grandfather Robert. The document was in a code which Cal himself has broken. He modestly declares that the discovery was an accident, but I suspect that perseverance and hard work had rather more to do with it.

At any rate, what a sombre light it sheds on our mysteries here!

The first entry is dated 1 June 1789, the last 27 October 1789 – four days before the cataclysmic disappearance of which Mrs Cloris spoke. It tells a tale of deepening obsession – nay, of madness – and makes hideously clear the relationship between Great-uncle Philip, the town of Jerusalem's Lot, and the book which rests in that desecrated church.

The town itself, according to Robert Boone, pre-dates Chapelwaite (built in 1782) and Preacher's Corners (known in those days as Preacher's Rest and founded in 1741); it was founded by a splinter group of the Puritan faith in 1710, a sect headed by a dour religious fanatic named James Boon. What a start that name gave me! That this Boon bore relation to my family can hardly be doubted, I believe. Mrs Cloris could not have been more right in her superstitious belief that familial blood-line is of crucial importance in this matter; and I recall with terror her answer to my question about Philip and *his* relationship to 'Salem's Lot. 'Blood relation,' said she, and I fear that it is so.

The town became a settled community built around the church where Boon preached – or held court. My grandfather intimates that he also held commerce with any number of ladies from the town, assuring them that this was God's way and will. As a result, the town became an anomaly which could only have existed in those isolated and queer days when belief in witches and the Virgin Birth existed hand in hand: an interbred, rather degenerate religious village controlled by a half-mad preacher whose twin gospels were the Bible and de Gourdge's sinister *Demon Dwellings*; a community in which rites of exorcism were held regularly; a community of incest and the insanity and physical defects which so often accompany that sin. I suspect [and believe Robert Boone must have also] that one of Boon's bastard offspring must have left [or have been spirited away from] Jerusalem's Lot to seek his fortune to the south – and thus founded our present lineage. I do know by my own family reckoning, that our clan supposedly originated in that part of Massachusetts which has so lately become this Sovereign State of Maine. My great-grandfather Kenneth Boone, became a rich man as a result of the then-flourishing fur trade. It was his money, increased by time and wise investment, which built this ancestral home long after his death in 1763. His sons, Philip and Robert, built Chapelwaite. *Blood calls to blood*, Mrs Cloris said. Could it be that Kenneth was born of James Boon, fled the madness of his father and his father's town, only to have his sons, all-unknowing, build the Boone home *not two miles from the Boon beginnings*? If 'tis true, does it not seem that some huge and invisible Hand has guided us?

According to Robert's diary, James Boon was ancient in 1789 – and he must have been. Granting him an age of twenty-five in the year of the town's founding, he would have been one hundred and four, a prodigious age. The following is quoted direct from Robert Boone's diary:

Today for the first time I met this Man with whom my Brother has been so unhealthily taken; I must admit this Boon controls a strange Magnetism which upset me Greatly. He is a veritable Ancient, white-bearded, and dresses in a black Cassock which struck me as somehow obscene. More disturbing yet was the Fact that he was surrounded by Women, as a Sultan would be surrounded by his Harem; and P. assures me he is active yet, although at least an Octogenarian . . .

The Village itself I had visited only once before, and will not visit again; its Streets are silent and filled with the Fear the old Man inspires from his Pulpit: I fear also that Like has mated with Like, as so many of the Faces are similar. It seemed that each way I turned I beheld the old Man's Visage . . . all are so wan; they seem Lack-Lustre, as if sucked dry of all Vitality, I beheld Eyeless and Noseless Children, Women who wept and gibbered and pointed at the Sky for no Reason, and garbled talk from the Scriptures with talk of Demons; . . . P. wished me to stay for Services, but the thought of that sinister Ancient in the Pulpit before an Audience of this Town's interbred Populace repulsed me and I made an Excuse . . .

The entries preceding and following this tell of Philip's growing fascination with James Boon. On 1 September 1789, Philip was baptized into Boon's church. His brother says: 'I am aghast with Amaze and Horror – my Brother has changed before my very Eyes – he even seems to grow to resemble the wretched Man.'

First mention of the book occurs on 23 July. Robert's diary records it only briefly: 'P. returned from the smaller Village tonight with, I thought, a rather wild Visage. Would not speak until Bedtime, when he said that Boon had enquired after a Book titled *Mysteries of the Worm*. To please P. I promised to write Johns & Goodfellow a letter of enquiry; P. almost fawningly Grateful.'

On 12 August, this notation: 'Rec'd two Letters in the Post today . . . one from Johns & Goodfellow in Boston. They have Note of the Tome in which P. has expressed an Interest. Only five Copies extant in this Country. The Letter is rather cool; odd indeed. Have known Henry Goodfellow for Years.'

13 August:

P. insanely excited by Goodfellow's letter; refuses to say why. He would only say that Boon is *exceedingly anxious* to obtain a Copy. Cannot think why, since by the Title it seems only a harmless gardening Treatise . . .

Am worried for Philip; he grows stranger to me Daily. I wish now we had not returned to Chapelwaite. The Summer is hot, oppressive, and filled with Omens . . .

There are only two further mentions of the infamous book in Robert's diary [he seems not to have realized the true importance of it, even at the end]. From the entry of 4 September:

I have petitioned Goodfellow to act as P.'s Agent in the matter of the Purchase, although my better Judgement cries against It. What use to demur? Has he not his own Money, should I refuse? And in return I have extracted a Promise from Philip to recant this noisome Baptism . . . yet he is so Hectic; nearly Feverish; I do not trust him. I am hopelessly *at Sea* in this Matter . . .

Finally, 16 September:

The Book arrived today, with a note from Goodfellow saying he wishes no more of my Trade . . . P. was excited to an unnatural Degree; all but snatched the Book from my Hands. It is writ in bastard Latin and a Runic Script of which I can read Nothing. The Thing seemed almost

warm to the Touch, and to vibrate in my Hands as if it contained a huge Power . . . I reminded P. of his Promise to Recant and he only laughed in an ugly, crazed Fashion and waved that Book in my Face, crying over and over again: 'We have it! We have it! The Worm! The Secret of the Worm!'

He is now fled, I suppose to his mad Benefactor, and I have not seen him more this Day . . .

Of the book there is no more, but I have made certain deductions which seem at least probable. First, that this book was, as Mrs Cloris has said, the subject of the falling-out between Robert and Philip; second, that it is a repository of unholy incantation, possibly of Druidic origin [many of the Druidic blood-rituals were preserved in print by the Roman conquerors of Britain in the name of scholarship, and many of these infernal cook-books are among the world's forbidden literature]; third, that Boon and Philip intended to use the book for their own ends. Perhaps, in some twisted way, they intended good, but I do not believe it. I believe they had long before bound themselves over to whatever faceless powers exist beyond the rim of the Universe; powers which may exist beyond the very fabric of Time. The last entries of Robert Boone's diary lend a dim glow of approbation to these speculations, and I allow them to speak for themselves:

26 October 1789

A terrific Babble in Preacher's Corners today; Frawley, the Blacksmith, seized my Arm and demanded to know 'What your Brother and that mad Antichrist are into up there.' Goody Randall claims there have been *Signs* in the Sky of *great impending Disaster*. A Cow has been born with two Heads.

As for Myself, I know not what impends; perhaps 'tis my Brother's Insanity. His Hair has gone Grey almost Overnight, his Eyes are great bloodshot Circles from

which the pleasing light of Sanity seems to have departed. He grins and whispers, and, for some Reason of his Own, has begun to haunt our Cellar when not in Jerusalem's Lot.

The Whippoorwills congregate about the House and upon the Grass; their combined Calling from the Mist blends with the Sea into an unearthly Shriek that precludes all thought of Sleep.

27 October 1789

Followed P. this Evening when he departed for Jerusalem's Lot, keeping a safe Distance to avoid Discovery. The cursed Whippoorwills flock through the Woods, filling all with a deathly, psycho-pompotic Chant. I dared not cross the Bridge; the Town all dark except for the Church, which was litten with a ghastly red Glare that seemed to transform the high, peak'd Windows into the Eyes of the Inferno. Voices rose and fell in a Devil's Litany, sometimes laughing, sometimes sobbing. The very Ground seem'd to swell and groan beneath me, as if it bore an awful Weight, and I fled, amaz'd and full of Terror, the hellish, screaming Cries of the Whippoorwills dinning in my ears as I ran through those shadow-riven Woods.

All tends to the Climax, yet unforeseen. I dare not sleep for the Dreams that come, yet not remain awake for what lunatic Terrors may come. The night is full of awful Sounds and I fear —

And yet I feel the urge to go again, to watch, *to see*. It seems that Philip himself calls me, and the Old Man.

The Birds

cursed cursed cursed

Here the diary of Robert Boone ends.

Yet you must notice, Bones, near the conclusion, that he claims Philip himself seemed to call him. My final conclusion is formed by these lines, by the talk of Mrs Cloris

and the others, but most of all by those terrifying figures in the cellar, dead yet alive. Our line is yet an unfortunate one, Bones. There is a curse over us which refuses to be buried; it lives a hideous shadow-life in this house and that town. And the culmination of the cycle is drawing close again. I am the last of the Boone blood. I fear that something knows this, and that I am at the nexus of an evil endeavour beyond all sane understanding. The anniversary is All Saints' Eve, one week from today.

How shall I proceed? If only you were here to counsel me, to help me! If only you were here!

I must know all; I must return to the shunned town. May God support me!

CHARLES

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

25 October 1850

Mr Boone has slept nearly all this day. His face is pallid and much thinner. I fear recurrence of his fever is inevitable.

While refreshing his water carafe I caught sight of two unmailed letters to Mr Granson in Florida. He plans to return to Jerusalem's Lot; 'twill be the killing of him if I allow it. Dare I steal away to Preacher's Corners and hire a buggy? I must, and yet what if he wakes? If I should return and find him gone?

The noises have begun in our walls again. Thank God he still sleeps! My mind shudders from the import of this.

*Later*

I brought him his dinner on a tray. He plans on rising later, and despite his evasions, I know what he plans; yet I go to Preacher's Corners. Several of the sleeping-powders prescribed to him during his late illness remained with my things; he drank one with his tea, all-unknowing. He sleeps again.

To leave him with the Things that shamble behind our walls terrifies me; to let him continue even one more day within these walls terrifies me even more greatly. I have locked him in.

God grant he should still be there, safe and sleeping, when I return with the buggy!

*Still later*

Stoned me! Stoned me like a wild and rabid dog! Monsters and fiends! These, that call themselves *men*! We are prisoners here —

The birds, the whippoorwills, have begun to gather.

26 October 1850

DEAR BONES,

It is nearly dusk, and I have just wakened, having slept nearly the last twenty-four hours away. Although Cal has said nothing, I suspect he put a sleeping-powder in my tea, having gleaned my intentions. He is a good and faithful friend, intending only the best, and I shall say nothing.

Yet my mind is set. Tomorrow is the day. I am calm, resolved, but also seem to feel the subtle onset of the fever again. If it is so, it *must* be tomorrow. Perhaps tonight would be better still; yet not even the fires of Hell itself could induce me to set foot in that village by shadowlight.

Should I write no more, may God bless and keep you, Bones.

CHARLES

*Postscriptum* — The birds have set up their cry, and the horrible shuffling sounds have begun again. Cal does not think I hear, but I do.

C.

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

27 October 1850

He is impersuadable. Very well. I go with him.

## DEAR BONES,

Weak, yet lucid. I am not sure of the date, yet my almanac assures me by tide and sunset that it must be correct. I sit at my desk, where I sat when I first wrote you from Chapelwaite, and look out over the dark sea from which the last of the light is rapidly fading. I shall never see more. This night is my night; I leave it for whatever shadows be.

How it heaves itself at the rocks, this sea! It throws clouds of sea-foam at the darkling sky in banners, making the floor beneath me tremble. In the window-glass I see my reflection, pallid as any vampire's. I have been without nourishment since the twenty-seventh of October, and should have been without water, had not Calvin left the carafe beside my bed on that day.

O, Cal! He is no more, Bones. He is gone in my place, in the place of this wretch with his pipestem arms and skull face who I see reflected back in the darkened glass. And yet he may be the more fortunate; for no dreams haunt him as they have haunted me these last days – twisted shapes that lurk in the nightmare corridors of delirium. Even now my hands tremble; I have splotched the page with ink.

Calvin confronted me on that morning just as I was about to slip away – and I thinking I had been so crafty. I had told him that I had decided we must leave, and asked him if he would go to Tandrell some ten miles distant, and hire a trap where we were less notorious. He agreed to make the hike and I watched him leave by the sea-road. When he was out of sight I quickly made myself ready, donning both coat and muffler [for the weather had turned frosty; the first touch of coming winter was on that morning's cutting breeze]. I wished briefly for a gun, then laughed at myself for the wish. What avails guns in such a matter?

I let myself out by the pantry-way, pausing for a last look at sea and sky; for the smell of the fresh air against the

putrescence I knew I should smell soon enough; for the sight of a foraging gull wheeling below the clouds.

I turned – and there stood Calvin McCann.

‘You shall not go alone,’ said he; and his face was as grim as ever I have seen it.

‘But, Calvin –’ I began.

‘No, not a word! We go together and do what we must, or I return you bodily to the house. You are not well. You shall not go alone.’

It is impossible to describe the conflicting emotions that swept over me; confusion, pique, gratefulness – yet the greatest of them was love.

We made our way silently past the summer house and the sun-dial, down the weed-covered verge and into the woods. All was dead still – not a bird sang nor a wood-cricket chirruped. The world seemed cupped in a silent pall. There was only the ever-present smell of salt, and from far away, the faint tang of woodsmoke. The woods were a blazoned riot of colour, but, to my eye, scarlet seemed to predominate all.

Soon the scent of salt passed, and another, more sinister odour took its place; that rottenness which I have mentioned. When we came to the leaning bridge which spanned the Royal, I expected Cal to ask me again to defer, but he did not. He paused, looked at that grim spire which seemed to mock the blue sky above it, and then looked at me. We went on.

We proceeded with quick yet dread footsteps to James Boon’s church. The door still hung ajar from our latter exit, and the darkness within seemed to leer at us. As we mounted the steps, brass seemed to fill my heart; my hand trembled as it touched the door-handle and pulled it. The smell within was greater, more noxious than ever.

We stepped into the shadowy anteroom and, with no pause, into the main chamber.

It was a shambles.

Something vast had been at work in there, and a mighty

destruction had taken place. Pews were overturned and heaped like jackstraws. The wicked cross lay against the east wall, and a jagged hole in the plaster above it testified to the force with which it had been hurled. The oil-lamps had been ripped from their high fixtures, and the reek of whale-oil mingled with the terrible stink which pervaded the town. And down the centre aisle, like a ghastly bridal path, was a trail of black ichor mingled with sinister tendrils of blood. Our eyes followed it to the pulpit – the only untouched thing in view. Atop it, staring at us from across that blasphemous Book with glazed eyes, was the butchered body of a lamb.

‘God,’ Calvin whispered.

We approached, keeping clear of the slime on the floor. The room echoed back our footsteps and seemed to transmute them into the sound of gigantic laughter.

We mounted the narthex together. The lamb had not been torn or eaten; it appeared, rather to have been *squeezed* until its blood-vessels had forcibly ruptured. Blood lay in thick and noisome puddles on the lectern itself, and about the base of it . . . *yet on the book it was transparent, and the crabbed runes could be read through it as through coloured glass!*

‘Must we touch it?’ Cal asked, unfaltering.

‘Yes. I must have it.’

‘What will you do?’

‘What should have been done sixty years ago. I am going to destroy it.’

We rolled the lamb’s corpse away from the book; it struck the floor with a hideous, lolling thud. The blood-stained pages now seemed alive with a scarlet glow of their own.

My ears began to ring and hum; a low chant seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. From the twisted look on Cal’s face I knew he heard the same. The floor beneath us trembled, as if the familiar which haunted this church came now unto us, to protect its own. The fabric of sane

space and time seemed to twist and crack; the church seemed filled with spectres and litten with the hell-glow of eternal cold fire. It seemed that I saw James Boon, hideous and misshapen, cavorting around the supine body of a woman, and my Grand-uncle Philip behind him, an acolyte in a black, hooded cassock, who held a knife and a bowl.

*'Deum vobiscum magna vermis -'*

The words shuddered and writhed on the page before me, soaked in the blood of sacrifice, prize of a creature that shambles beyond the stars -

A blind, interbred congregation swaying in mindless, demonic praise; deformed faces filled with hungering, nameless anticipation -

And the Latin was replaced by an older tongue, ancient when Egypt was young and the Pyramids unbuilt, ancient when this Earth still hung in an unformed, boiling firmament of empty gas:

*'Gyyagin vardar Yogsoggoth! Verminis! Gyyagin! Gyyagin! Gyyagin!'*

The pulpit began to rend and split, pushing upwards -

Calvin screamed and lifted an arm to shield his face. The narthex trembled with a huge, tenebrous motion like a ship wracked in a gale. I snatched up the book and held it away from me; it seemed filled with the heat of the sun and I felt that I should be cindered, blinded.

'Run!' Calvin screamed. 'Run!'

But I stood frozen and the alien presence filled me like an ancient vessel that had waited for years - for generations!

'Gyyagin vardar!' I screamed. 'Servant of Yogsoggoth, the Nameless One! The Worm from beyond Space! Star-Eater! Blinder of Time! Verminis! Now comes the Hour of Filling, the Time of Rending! Verminis! Alyah! Alyah! Gyyagin!'

Calvin pushed me and I tottered, the church whirling before me, and fell to the floor. My head crashed against the edge of an upturned pew, and red fire filled my head - yet seemed to clear it.

I groped for the sulphur matches I had brought.

Subterranean thunder filled the place. Plaster fell. The rusted bell in the steeple pealed a choked devil's carillon in sympathetic vibration.

My match flared. I touched it to the book just as the pulpit exploded upwards in a rending explosion of wood. A huge black maw was discovered beneath; Cal tottered on the edge his hands held out, his face distended in a wordless scream that I shall hear for ever.

And then there was a huge surge of grey, vibrating flesh. The smell became a nightmare tide. It was a huge outpouring of a viscid, pustulant jelly, a huge and awful form that seemed to sky-rocket from the very bowels of the ground. And yet, with a sudden horrible comprehension which no man can have known, I perceived *that it was but one ring, one segment, of a monster worm that had existed eyeless for years in the chambered darkness beneath that abominated church!*

The book flared alight in my hands, and the Thing seemed to scream soundlessly above me. Calvin was struck glancingly and flung the length of the church like a doll with a broken neck.

It subsided – the thing subsided, leaving only a huge and shattered hole surrounded with black slime, and a great screaming, mewling sound that seemed to fade through colossal distances and was gone.

I looked down. The book was ashes.

I began to laugh, then to howl like a struck beast.

All sanity left me and I sat on the floor with blood streaming from my temple, screaming and gibbering into those unhallowed shadows while Calvin sprawled in the far corner, staring at me with glazing, horror-struck eyes.

I have no idea how long I existed in that state. It is beyond all telling. But when I came again to my faculties, shadows had drawn long paths around me and I sat in twilight. Movement had caught my eye, movement from the shattered hole in the narthex floor.

A hand groped its way over the riven floorboards.

My mad laughter choked in my throat. All hysteria melted into numb bloodlessness.

With terrible, vengeful slowness, a wracked figure pulled itself up from darkness, and a half-skull peered at me. Beetles crawled over the fleshless forehead. A rotted cassock clung to the askew hollows of mouldered collarbones. Only the eyes lived – red, insane pits that glared at me with more than lunacy; they glared with the empty life of the pathless wastes beyond the edges of the Universe.

It came to take me down to darkness.

That was when I fled screeching, leaving the body of my lifelong friend unheeded in that place of dread. I ran until the air seemed to burst like magma in my lungs and brain. I ran until I had gained this possessed and tainted house again, and my room, where I collapsed and have lain like a dead man until today. I ran because even in my crazed state, and even in the shattered ruin of that dead-yet-animated shape, *I had seen the family resemblance*. Yet not of Philip or of Robert, whose likenesses hang in an upstairs gallery. *That rotted visage belonged to James Boon, Keeper of the Worm!*

He still lives somewhere in the twisted, lightless wanderings beneath Jerusalem's Lot and Chapelwaite – and *It* still lives. The burning of the book thwarted *It*, but there are other copies.

Yet I am the gateway, and I am the last of the Boone blood. For the good of all humanity I must die . . . and break the chain for ever.

I go to the sea now, Bones. My journey, like my story, is at an end. May God rest you and grant you all peace.

CHARLES

The odd series of papers above was eventually received by Mr Everett Granson, to whom they had been addressed. It is assumed that a recurrence of the unfortunate brain fever which struck him originally following the death of his wife

in 1848 caused Charles Boone to lose his sanity and murder his companion and longtime friend, Mr Calvin McCann.

The entries in Mr McCann's pocket journal are a fascinating exercise in forgery, undoubtedly perpetrated by Charles Boone in an effort to reinforce his own paranoid delusions.

In at least two particulars, however, Charles Boone is proved wrong. First, when the town of Jerusalem's Lot was 'rediscovered' (I use the term historically, of course), the floor of the narthex, although rotted, showed no sign of the explosion or huge damage. Although the ancient pews *were* overturned and several windows shattered, this can be assumed to be the work of vandals from neighbouring towns over the years. Among the older residents of Preacher's Corners and Tandrell there is still some idle rumour about Jerusalem's Lot (perhaps, in his day, it was this kind of harmless folk legend which started Charles Boone's mind on its fatal course), but this seems hardly relevant.

Second, Charles Boone was not the last of his line. His grandfather, Robert Boone, sired at least two bastards. One died in infancy. The second took the Boone name and located in the town of Central Falls, Rhode Island. I am the final descendant of this offshoot of the Boone line; Charles Boone's second cousin, removed by three generations. These papers have been in my committal for ten years. I offer them for publication on the occasion of my residence in the Boone ancestral home, Chapelwaite, in the hope that the reader will find sympathy in his heart for Charles Boone's poor, misguided soul. So far as I can tell, he was correct about only one thing: this place badly needs the services of an exterminator.

There are some huge rats in the walls, by the sound.

Signed,

James Robert Boone

2 October 1971.

## GRAVEYARD SHIFT

TWO A.M., Friday.

Hall was sitting on the bench by the elevator, the only place on the third floor where a working joe could catch a smoke, when Warwick came up. He wasn't happy to see Warwick. The foreman wasn't supposed to show up on three during the graveyard shift; he was supposed to stay down in his office in the basement drinking coffee from the urn that stood on the corner of his desk. Besides, it was hot.

It was the hottest June on record in Gates Falls, and the Orange Crush thermometer which was also by the elevator had once rested at 94 degrees at three in the morning. God only knew what kind of hellhole the mill was on the three-to-eleven shift.

Hall worked the picker machine, a balky gadget manufactured by a defunct Cleveland firm in 1934. He had only been working in the mill since April, which meant he was still making minimum \$1.78 an hour, which was still all right. No wife, no steady girl, no alimony. He was a drifter, and during the last three years he had moved on his thumb from Berkeley (college student) to Lake Tahoe (busboy) to Galveston (stevedore) to Miami (short-order cook) to Wheeling (taxi driver and dishwasher) to Gates Falls, Maine (picker-machine operator). He didn't figure on moving again until the snow fell. He was a solitary person and he liked the hours from eleven to seven when the blood flow of the big mill was at its coolest, not to mention the temperature.

The only thing he did not like was the rats.

The third floor was long and deserted, lit only by the sputtering glow of the fluorescents. Unlike the other levels of the mill, it was relatively silent and unoccupied – at least by the humans. The rats were another matter. The only machine on three was the picker; the rest of the floor was storage for the ninety-pound bags of fibre which had yet to be sorted by Hall's long gear-toothed machine. They were stacked like link sausages in long rows, some of them (especially the discontinued meltons and irregular slipes for which there were no orders) years old and dirty grey with industrial wastes. They made fine nesting places for the rats, huge, fat-bellied creatures with rabid eyes and bodies that jumped with lice and vermin.

Hall had developed a habit of collecting a small arsenal of soft-drink cans from the trash barrel during his break. He pegged them at the rats during times when work was slow, retrieving them later at his leisure. Only this time Mr Foreman had caught him, coming up the stairs instead of using the elevator like the sneaky sonofabitch everyone said he was.

'What are you up to, Hall?'

'The rats,' Hall said, realizing how lame that must sound now that all the rats had snuggled safely back into their houses. 'I peg cans at 'em when I see 'em.'

Warwick nodded once, briefly. He was a big beefy man with a crew cut. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his tie was pulled down. He looked at Hall closely. 'We don't pay you to chuck cans at rats, mister. Not even if you pick them up again.'

'Harry hasn't sent down an order for twenty minutes,' Hall answered, thinking: *Why couldn't you stay the hell put and drink your coffee?* 'I can't run it through the picker if I don't have it.'

Warwick nodded as if the topic no longer interested him.

'Maybe I'll take a walk up and see Wisconsky,' he said.

'Five to one he's reading a magazine while the crap piles up in his bins.'

Hall didn't say anything.

Warwick suddenly pointed. 'There's one! Get the bastard!'

Hall fired the Nehi can he had been holding with one whistling, overhand motion. The rat, which had been watching him from atop one of the fabric bags with its bright buckshot eyes, fled with one faint squeak. Warwick threw back his head and laughed as Hall went after the can.

'I came to see you about something else,' Warwick said.  
'Is that so?'

'Next week's Fourth of July week.' Hall nodded. The mill would be shut down Monday to Saturday – vacation week for men with at least one year's tenure. Layoff week for men with less than a year. 'You want to work?'

Hall shrugged. 'Doing what?'

'We're going to clean the whole basement level. Nobody's touched it for twelve years. Helluva mess. We're going to use hoses.'

'The town zoning committee getting on the board of directors?'

Warwick looked steadily at Hall. 'You want it or not? Two an hour, double time on the fourth. We're working the graveyard shift because it'll be cooler.'

Hall calculated. He could clear maybe seventy-five bucks after taxes. Better than the goose egg he had been looking forward to.

'All right.'

'Report down by the dye house next Monday.'

Hall watched him as he started back to the stairs. Warwick paused halfway there and turned back to look at Hall. 'You used to be a college boy, didn't you?'

Hall nodded.

'Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.'

He left. Hall sat down and lit another smoke, holding a soda can in one hand and watching for the rats. He could

just imagine how it would be in the basement – the sub-basement, actually, a level below the dye house. Damp, dark, full of spiders and rotten cloth and ooze from the river – and rats. Maybe even bats, the aviators of the rodent family. *Gah.*

Hall threw the can hard, then smiled thinly to himself as the faint sound of Warwick's voice came down through the overhead ducts, reading Harry Wisconsky the riot act.

*Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.*

He stopped smiling abruptly and butted his smoke. A few moments later Wisconsky started to send rough nylon down through the blowers, and Hall went to work. And after a while the rats came out and sat atop the bags at the back of the long room watching him with their unblinking black eyes. They looked like a jury.

**Eleven P.M., Monday.**

There were about thirty-six men sitting around when Warwick came in wearing a pair of old jeans tucked into high rubber boots. Hall had been listening to Harry Wisconsky, who was enormously fat, enormously lazy, and enormously gloomy.

'It's gonna be a mess,' Wisconsky was saying when Mr Foreman came in. 'You wait and see, we're all gonna go home blacker'n midnight in Persia.'

'Okay!' Warwick said. 'We strung sixty lightbulbs down there, so it should be bright enough for you to see what you're doing. You guys –' he pointed to a bunch of men that had been leaning against the drying spools – 'I want you to hook up the hoses over there to the main water conduit by the stairwell. You can unroll them down the stairs. We got about eighty yards for each man, and that should be plenty. Don't get cute and spray one of your buddies or you'll send him to the hospital. They pack a wallop.'

'Somebody'll get hurt,' Wisconsky prophesied sourly. 'Wait and see.'

'You other guys,' Warwick said pointing to the group that Hall and Wisconsky were a part of. 'You're the crap crew tonight. You go in pairs with an electric wagon for each team. There's old office furniture, bags of cloth, hunks of busted machinery, you name it. We're gonna pile it by the airshaft at the west end. Anyone who doesn't know how to run a wagon?'

No one raised a hand. The electric wagons were battery-driven contraptions like miniature dump trucks. They developed a nauseating stink after continual use that reminded Hall of burning power lines.

'Okay,' Warwick said. 'We got the basement divided up into sections, and we'll be done by Thursday. Friday we'll chain-hoist the crap out. Questions?'

There were none. Hall studied the foreman's face closely, and he had a sudden premonition of a strange thing coming. The idea pleased him. He did not like Warwick very much.

'Fine,' Warwick said. 'Let's get at it.'

Two A.M., Tuesday.

Hall was bushed and very tired of listening to Wisconsky's steady patter of profane complaints. He wondered if it would do any good to belt Wisconsky. He doubted it. It would just give Wisconsky something else to bitch about.

Hall had known it would be bad, but this was murder. For one thing, he hadn't anticipated the smell. The polluted stink of the river, mixed with the odour of decaying fabric, rotting masonry, vegetable matter. In the far corner, where they had begun, Hall discovered a colony of huge white toadstools poking their way up through the shattered cement. His hands had come in contact with them as he pulled and yanked at a rusty gear-toothed wheel, and they felt curiously warm and bloated, like the flesh of a man afflicted with dropsy.

The bulbs couldn't banish the twelve-year darkness; it could only push it back a little and cast a sickly yellow glow

over the whole mess. The place looked like the shattered nave of a desecrated church, with its high ceiling and mammoth discarded machinery that they would never be able to move, its wet walls overgrown with patches of yellow moss, and the atonal choir that was the water from the hoses, running in the half-clogged sewer network that eventually emptied into the river below the falls.

And the rats – huge ones that made those on third look like dwarfs. God knew what they were eating down here. They were continually overturning boards and bags to reveal huge nests of shredded newspaper, watching with atavistic loathing as the pups fled into the cracks and crannies, their eyes huge and blind with the continuous darkness.

‘Let’s stop for a smoke,’ Wisconsky said. He sounded out of breath, but Hall had no idea why; he had been goldbricking all night. Still, it was about that time, and they were currently out of sight of everyone else.

‘All right.’ He leaned against the edge of the electric wagon and lit up.

‘I never should’ve let Warwick talk me into this,’ Wisconsky said dolefully. ‘This ain’t work for a *man*. But he was mad the other night when he caught me in the crapper up on four with my pants up. Christ, was he mad.’

Hall said nothing. He was thinking about Warwick, and about the rats. Strange, how the two things seemed tied together. The rats seemed to have forgotten all about men in their long stay under the mill; they were impudent and hardly afraid at all. One of them had sat up on its hind legs like a squirrel until Hall had got in kicking distance, and then it had launched itself at his boot, biting at the leather. Hundreds, maybe thousands. He wondered how many varieties of disease they were carrying around in this black sumphole. And Warwick. Something about him –

‘I need the money,’ Wisconsky said. ‘But Christ Jesus, buddy, this ain’t no work for a *man*. Those rats.’ He looked around fearfully. ‘It almost seems like they think. You ever

wonder how it'd be, if we was little and they were big —'

'Oh, shut up,' Hall said.

Wisconsky looked at him, wounded. 'Say, I'm sorry, buddy. It's just that . . .' He trailed off. 'Jesus, this place stinks!' he cried. 'This ain't no kind of *work for a man!*' A spider crawled off the edge of the wagon and scrambled up his arm. He brushed it off with a choked sound of disgust.

'Come on,' Hall said, snuffing his cigarette. 'The faster, the quicker.'

'I suppose,' Wisconsky said miserably. 'I suppose.'

Four A.M., Tuesday.

Lunchtime.

Hall and Wisconsky sat with three or four other men, eating their sandwiches with black hands that not even the industrial detergent could clean. Hall ate looking into the foreman's little glass office. Warwick was drinking coffee and eating cold hamburgers with great relish.

'Ray Upson had to go home,' Charlie Brochu said.

'He puke?' someone asked. 'I almost did.'

'Nuh. Ray'd eat cowflop before he'd puke. Rat bit him.'

Hall looked up thoughtfully from his examination of Warwick. 'Is that so?' he asked.

'Yeah.' Brochu shook his head. 'I was teaming with him. Goddamndest thing I ever saw. Jumped out of a hole in one of those old cloth bags. Must have been big as a cat. Grabbed on to his hand and started chewing.'

'Jee-sus,' one of the men said, looking green.

'Yeah,' Brochu said. 'Ray screamed just like a woman, and I ain't blamin' him. He bled like a pig. Would that thing let go? No sir. I had to belt it three or four times with a board before it would. Ray was just about crazy. He stomped it until it wasn't nothing but a mess of fur. Damndest thing I ever saw. Warwick put a bandage on him and sent him home. Told him to go to the doctor tomorrow.'

'That was big of the bastard,' somebody said.

As if he had heard, Warwick got to his feet in his office, stretched, and then came to the door. 'Time we got back with it.'

The men got to their feet slowly, eating up all the time they possibly could stowing their dinner jackets, getting cold drinks, buying candy bars. Then they started down, heels clanking dispiritedly on the steel grillework of the stair risers.

Warwick passed Hall, clapping him on the shoulder. 'How's it going, college boy?' He didn't wait for an answer.

'Come on,' Hall said patiently to Wisconsky, who was tying his shoelace. They went downstairs.

**Seven A.M., Tuesday.**

Hall and Wisconsky walked out together; it seemed to Hall that he had somehow inherited the fat Pole. Wisconsky was almost comically dirty, his fat moon face smeared like that of a small boy who has just been thrashed by the town bully.

There was none of the usual rough banter from the other men, the pulling of shirt-tails, the cracks about who was keeping Tony's wife warm between the hours of one and four. Nothing but silence and an occasional hawking sound as someone spat on the dirty floor.

'You want a lift?' Wisconsky asked him hesitantly.

'Thanks.'

They didn't talk as they rode up Mill Street and crossed the bridge. They exchanged only a brief word when Wisconsky dropped him off in front of his apartment.

Hall went directly to the shower, still thinking about Warwick, trying to place whatever it was about Mr Foreman that drew him, made him feel that somehow they had become tied together.

He slept as soon as his head hit the pillow, but his sleep was broken and restless: he dreamed of rats.

One A.M., Wednesday.

It was better running the horses.

They couldn't go in until the crap crews had finished a section, and quite often they were done hosing before the next section was clear — which meant time for a cigarette. Hall worked the nozzle of one of the long hoses and Wisconsky pattered back and forth, unsnagging lengths of the hose, turning the water on and off, moving obstructions.

Warwick was short-tempered because the work was proceeding slowly. They would never be done by Thursday, the way things were going.

Now they were working on a helter-skelter jumble of nineteenth-century office equipment that had been piled in one corner — smashed rolltop desks, mouldy ledgers, reams of invoices, chairs with broken seats — and it was rat heaven. Scores of them squeaked and ran through the dark and crazy passages that honeycombed the heap, and after two men were bitten, the others refused to work until Warwick sent someone upstairs to get heavy rubberized gloves, the kind usually reserved for the dye-house crew, which had to work with acids.

Hall and Wisconsky were waiting to go in with their hoses when a sandy-haired bullneck named Carmichael began howling curses and backing away, slapping at his chest with his gloved hands.

A huge rat with grey-streaked fur and ugly, glaring eyes had bitten into his shirt and hung there, squeaking and kicking at Carmichael's belly with its back paws. Carmichael finally knocked it away with his fist, but there was a huge hole in his shirt, and a thin line of blood trickled from above one nipple. The anger faded from his face. He turned away and retched.

Hall turned the hose on the rat, which was old and moving slowly, a snatch of Carmichael's shirt still caught in its jaws. The roaring pressure drove it backward against the wall, where it smashed limply.

Warwick came over, an odd, strained smile on his lips. He clapped Hall on the shoulder. 'Damn sight better than throwing cans at the little bastards, huh, college boy?'

'Some little bastard,' Wisconsky said. 'It's a foot long.'

'Turn that hose over there.' Warwick pointed at the jumble of furniture. 'You guys, get out of the way!'

'With pleasure,' someone muttered.

Carmichael charged up to Warwick, his face sick and twisted. 'I'm gonna have compensation for this! I'm gonna -'

'Sure,' Warwick said, smiling. 'You got bit on the titty. Get out of the way before you get pasted down by this water.'

Hall pointed the nozzle and let it go. It hit with a white explosion of spray, knocking over a desk and smashing two chairs to splinters. Rats ran everywhere, bigger than any Hall had ever seen. He could hear men crying out in disgust and horror as they fled, things with huge eyes and sleek, plump bodies. He caught a glimpse of one that looked as big as a healthy six-week puppy. He kept on until he could see no more, then shut the nozzle down.

'Okay!' Warwick called. 'Let's pick it up!'

'I didn't hire out as no exterminator!' Cy Ippeston called mutinously. Hall had tipped a few with him the week before. He was a young guy, wearing a smut-stained baseball cap and a T-shirt.

'That you, Ippeston?' Warwick asked genially.

Ippeston looked uncertain, but stepped forward. 'Yeah. I don't want no more of these rats. I hired to clean up, not to maybe get rabies or typhoid or somethin'. Maybe you best count me out.'

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. Wisconsky stole a look at Hall, but Hall was examining the nozzle of the hose he was holding. It had a bore like a .45 and could probably knock a man twenty feet.

'You saying you want to punch your clock, Cy?'

'Thinkin' about it,' Ippeston said.

Warwick nodded. 'Okay. You and anybody else that wants. But this ain't no unionized shop, and never has been. Punch out now and you'll never punch back in. I'll see to it.'

'Aren't you some hot ticket,' Hall muttered.

Warwick swung around. 'Did you say something, college boy?'

Hall regarded him blandly. 'Just clearing my throat, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick smiled. 'Something taste bad to you?'

Hall said nothing.

'All right, let's pick it up!' Warwick bawled.

They went back to work.

Two A.M., Thursday.

Hall and Wisconsky were working with the trucks again, picking up junk. The pile by the west airshaft had grown to amazing proportions, but they were still not half done.

'Happy Fourth,' Wisconsky said when they stopped for a smoke. They were working near the north wall, far from the stairs. The light was extremely dim, and some trick of acoustics made the other men seem miles away.

'Thanks.' Hall dragged on his smoke. 'Haven't seen many rats tonight.'

'Nobody has,' Wisconsky said. 'Maybe they got wise.'

They were standing at the end of a crazy, zigzagging alley formed by piles of old ledgers and invoices, mouldy bags of cloth, and two huge flat looms of ancient vintage. 'Gah,' Wisconsky said, spitting. 'That Warwick -'

'Where do you suppose all the rats got to?' Hall asked, almost to himself. 'Not into the walls -' He looked at the wet and crumbling masonry that surrounded the huge foundation stones. 'They'd drown. The river's saturated everything.'

Something black and flapping suddenly dive-bombed

them. Wisconsky screamed and put his hands over his head.

'A bat,' Hall said, watching after it as Wisconsky straightened up.

'A bat! A bat!' Wisconsky raved. 'What's a bat doing in the cellar? They're supposed to be in trees and under eaves and -'

'It was a big one,' Hall said softly. 'And what's a bat but a rat with wings?'

'Jesus,' Wisconsky moaned. 'How did it -'

'Get in? Maybe the same way the rats got out.'

'What's going on back there?' Warwick shouted from somewhere behind them. 'Where are you?'

'Don't sweat it,' Hall said softly. His eyes gleamed in the dark.

'Was that you, college boy?' Warwick called. He sounded closer.

'It's okay!' Hall yelled. 'I barked my shin!'

Warwick's short, barking laugh. 'You want a Purple Heart?'

Wisconsky looked at Hall. 'Why'd you say that?'

'Look.' Hall knelt and lit a match. There was a square in the middle of the wet and crumbling cement. 'Tap it.'

Wisconsky did. 'It's wood.'

Hall nodded. 'It's the top of a support. I've seen some other ones around here. There's another level under this part of the basement.'

'God,' Wisconsky said with utter revulsion.

Three-thirty A.M., Thursday.

They were in the north-east corner, Ippeston and Brochu behind them with one of the high-pressure hoses, when Hall stopped and pointed at the floor. 'There I thought we'd come across it.'

There was a wooden trapdoor with a crusted iron ring-bolt set near the centre.

He walked back to Ippeston and said, 'Shut it off for a

minute.' When the hose was choked to a trickle, he raised his voice to a shout. 'Hey! Hey, Warwick! Better come here a minute!'

Warwick came splashing over, looking at Hall with that same hard smile in his eyes. 'Your shoelace come untied, college boy?'

'Look,' Hall said. He kicked the trapdoor with his foot. 'Sub-cellar.'

'So what?' Warwick asked. 'This isn't break time, col—'

'That's where your rats are,' Hall said. 'They're breeding down there. Wisconsky and I even saw a bat earlier.'

Some of the other men had gathered around and were looking at the trapdoor.

'I don't care,' Warwick said. 'The job was the basement, not —'

'You'll need about twenty exterminators, trained ones,' Hall was saying. 'Going to cost the management a pretty penny. Too bad.'

Someone laughed. 'Fat chance.'

Warwick looked at Hall as if he were a bug under glass. 'You're really a case, you are,' he said, sounding fascinated. 'Do you think I give a good goddamn how many rats there are under there?'

'I was at the library this afternoon and yesterday,' Hall said. 'Good thing you kept reminding me I was a college boy. I read the town zoning ordinances, Warwick — they were set up in 1911, before this mill got big enough to co-opt the zoning board. Know what I found?'

Warwick's eyes were cold. 'Take a walk, college boy. You're fired.'

'I found out,' Hall ploughed on as if he hadn't heard, 'I found out that there is a zoning law in Gates Falls about vermin. You spell that v-e-r-m-i-n, in case you wondered. It means disease-carrying animals such as bats, skunks, unlicensed dogs — and rats. Especially rats. Rats are mentioned fourteen times in two paragraphs, Mr Foreman. So you just keep in mind that the minute I punch out I'm going

straight to the town commissioner and tell him what the situation down here is.'

He paused, relishing Warwick's hate-congested face. 'I think that between me, him, and the town committee, we can get an injunction slapped on this place. You're going to be shut down a lot longer than just Saturday, Mr Foreman. And I got a good idea what *your* boss is going to say when he turns up. Hope your unemployment insurance is paid up, Warwick.'

Warwick's hands formed into claws. 'You damned snot-nose, I ought to -' He looked down at the trapdoor, and suddenly his smile reappeared. 'Consider yourself rehired, college boy.'

'I thought you might see the light.'

Warwick nodded, the same strange grin on his face. 'You're just so smart. I think maybe you ought to go down there, Hall, so we got somebody with a college education to give us an informed opinion. You and Wisconsky.'

'Not me!' Wisconsky exclaimed. 'Not me, I -'

Warwick looked at him. 'You what?'

Wisconsky shut up.

'Good,' Hall said cheerfully. 'We'll need three flashlights. I think I saw a whole rack of those six-battery jobs in the main office, didn't I?'

'You want to take somebody else?' Warwick asked expansively. 'Sure, pick your man.'

'You,' Hall said gently. The strange expression had come into his face again. 'After all, the management should be represented, don't you think? Just so Wisconsky and I don't see *too* many rats down there?'

Someone (it sounded like Ippeston) laughed loudly.

Warwick looked at the men carefully. They studied the tips of their shoes. Finally he pointed at Brochu. 'Brochu, go up to the office and get three flashlights. Tell the watchman I said to let you in.'

'Why'd you get me into this?' Wisconsky moaned to Hall. 'You know I hate those -'

'It wasn't me,' Hall said, and looked at Warwick.

Warwick looked back at him, and neither would drop his eyes.

Four A.M., Thursday.

Brochu returned with the flashlights. He gave one to Hall, one to Wisconsky, one to Warwick.

'Ippeson! Give the hose to Wisconsky.' Ippeson did so. The nozzle trembled delicately between the Pole's hands.

'All right,' Warwick said to Wisconsky. 'You're in the middle. If there are rats, you let them have it.'

Sure, Hall thought. And if there are rats, Warwick won't see them. And neither will Wisconsky, after he finds an extra ten in his pay envelope.

Warwick pointed at two of the men. 'Lift it.'

One of them bent over the ringbolt and pulled. For a moment Hall didn't think it was going to give, and then it yanked free with an odd, crunching snap. The other man put his fingers on the underside to help pull, then withdrew with a cry. His hands were crawling with huge and sightless beetles.

With a convulsive grunt the man on the ringbolt pulled the trap back and let it drop. The underside was black with an odd fungus that Hall had never seen before. The beetles dropped off into the darkness below or ran across the floor to be crushed.

'Look,' Hall said.

There was a rusty lock bolted on the underside, now broken. 'But it shouldn't be underneath,' Warwick said. 'It should be on top. Why -'

'Lots of reasons,' Hall said. 'Maybe so nothing on this side could open it - at least when the lock was new. Maybe so nothing on that side could get up.'

'But who locked it?' Wisconsky asked.

'Ah,' Hall said mockingly, looking at Warwick. 'A mystery.'

'Listen,' Brochu whispered.

'Oh, God,' Wisconsky sobbed. 'I ain't going down there!'

It was a soft sound, almost expectant; the whisk and patter of thousands of paws, the squeaking of rats.

'Could be frogs,' Warwick said.

Hall laughed aloud.

Warwick shone his light down. A sagging flight of wooden stairs led down to the black stones of the floor beneath. There was not a rat in sight.

'Those stairs won't hold us,' Warwick said with finality.

Brochu took two steps forward and jumped up and down on the first step. It creaked but showed no sign of giving way.

'I didn't ask you to do that,' Warwick said.

'You weren't there when that rat bit Ray,' Brochu said softly.

'Let's go,' Hall said.

Warwick took a last sardonic look around at the circle of men, then walked to the edge with Hall. Wisconsky stepped reluctantly between them. They went down one at a time. Hall, then Wisconsky, then Warwick. Their flashlight beams played over the floor, which was twisted and heaved into a hundred crazy hills and valleys. The hose thumped along behind Wisconsky like a clumsy serpent.

When they got to the bottom, Warwick flashed his light around. It picked out a few rotting boxes, some barrels, little else. The seep from the river stood in puddles that came to ankle depth on their boots.

'I don't hear them any more,' Wisconsky whispered.

They walked slowly away from the trapdoor, their feet shuffling through the slime. Hall paused and shone his light on a huge wooden box with white letters on it. 'Elias Varney,' he read, '1841. Was the mill here then?'

'No,' Warwick said. 'It wasn't built until 1897. What difference?'

Hall didn't answer. They walked forward again. The sub-cellar was longer than it should have been, it seemed.

The stench was stronger, a smell of decay and rot and things buried. And still the only sound was the faint, cavelike drip of water.

'What's that?' Hall asked, pointing his beam at a jut of concrete that protruded perhaps two feet into the cellar. Beyond it, the darkness continued and it seemed to Hall that he could now hear sounds up there, curiously stealthy.

Warwick peered at it. 'It's . . . no, that can't be right.'

'Outer wall of the mill, isn't it? and up ahead . . .'

'I'm going back,' Warwick said, suddenly turning around.

Hall grabbed his neck roughly. 'You're not going anywhere, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick looked up at him, his grin cutting the darkness. 'You're crazy, college boy. Isn't that right? Crazy as a loon.'

'You shouldn't push people, friend, keep going.'

Wisconsky moaned. 'Hall –'

'Give me that.' Hall grabbed the hose. He let go of Warwick's neck and pointed the hose at his head. Wisconsky turned abruptly and crashed back towards the trapdoor. Hall did not even turn. 'After you, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick stepped forward, walking under the place where the mill ended above them. Hall flashed his light about, and felt a cold satisfaction – premonition fulfilled. The rats had closed in around them, silent as death. Crowded in, rank on rank. Thousands of eyes looked greedily back at him. In ranks to the wall, some fully as high as a man's shin.

Warwick saw them a moment later and came to a full stop. 'They're all around us, college boy.' His voice was still calm, still in control, but it held a jagged edge.

'Yes,' Hall said. 'Keep going.'

They walked forward, the hose dragging behind. Hall looked back once and saw the rats had closed the aisle behind them and were gnawing at the heavy canvas hosing.

One looked up and almost seemed to grin at him before lowering his head again. He could see the bats now, too. They were roosting from the rough-hewn overheads, huge, the size of crows or rooks.

'Look,' Warwick said, centring his beam about five feet ahead.

A skull, green with mould, laughed up at them. Further on Hall could see an ulna, one pelvic wing, part of a ribcage. 'Keep going,' Hall said. He felt something bursting up inside him, something lunatic and dark with colours. *You are going to break before I do, Mr Foreman, so help me God.*

They walked past the bones. The rats were not crowding them; their distances appeared constant. Up ahead Hall saw one cross their path of travel. Shadows hid it, but he caught sight of a pink twitching tail as thick as a telephone cord.

Up ahead the flooring rose sharply, then dipped. Hall could hear a stealthy, rustling sound, a bit sound. Something that perhaps no living man had ever seen. It occurred to Hall that he had perhaps been looking for something like this through all his days of crazy wandering.

The rats were moving in, creeping on their bellies, forcing them forward. 'Look,' Warwick said coldly.

Hall saw. Something had happened to the rats back here, some hideous mutation that never could have survived under the eye of the sun; nature would have forbidden it. But down here, nature had taken on another ghastly face.

The rats were gigantic, some as high as three feet. But their rear legs were gone and they were blind as moles, like their flying cousins. They dragged themselves forward with hideous eagerness.

Warwick turned and faced Hall, the smile hanging on by brute willpower. Hall really had to admire him. 'We can't go on, Hall. You must see that.'

'The rats have business with you, I think,' Hall said. Warwick's control slipped. 'Please,' he said. 'Please.'

Hall smiled. 'Keep going.'

Warwick was looking over his shoulder. 'They're gnawing into the hose. When they get through it, we'll never get back.'

'I know. Keep going.'

'You're insane —' A rat ran across Warwick's shoe and he screamed. Hall smiled and gestured with his light. They were all around, the closest of them less than a foot away now.

Warwick began to walk again. The rats drew back.

They topped the miniature rise and looked down. Warwick reached it first, and Hall saw his face go white as paper. Spit ran down his chin. 'Oh, my God. Dear Jesus.

And he turned to run.

Hall opened the nozzle of the hose and the high-pressure rush of water struck Warwick squarely on the chest, knocking him back out of sight. There was a long scream that rose over the sound of the water. Thrashing sounds.

'Hall!' Grunts. A huge, tenebrous squeaking that seemed to fill the earth.

'HALL FOR GOD'S SAKE —'

A sudden wet ripping noise. Another scream, weaker. Something huge shifted and turned. Quite distinctly Hall heard the wet snap that a fractured bone makes.

A legless rat, guided by some bastard form of sonar, lunged against him, biting. Its body was flabby, warm. Almost absently Hall turned the hose on it, knocking it away. The hose did not have quite so much pressure now.

Hall walked to the brow of the wet hill and looked down.

The rat filled the whole gully at the far end of that noxious tomb. It was a huge and pulsating grey, eyeless, totally without legs. When Hall's light struck it, it made a hideous mewling noise. Their queen, then, the *magna mater*. A huge and nameless thing whose progeny might some day develop wings. It seemed to dwarf what remained of Warwick, but that was probably just illusion. It was the shock of seeing a rat as big as a Holstein calf.

'Goodbye, Warwick,' Hall said. The rat crouched over Mr Foreman jealously, ripping at one limp arm.

Hall turned away and began to make his way back rapidly, halting the rats with his hose, which was growing less and less potent. Some of them got through and attacked his legs above the tops of his boots with biting lunges. One hung stubbornly on at his thigh, ripping at the cloth of his corduroy pants. Hall made a fist and smashed it aside.

He was nearly three-quarters of the way back when the huge whirring filled the darkness. He looked up and the gigantic flying form smashed into his face.

The mutated bats had not lost their tails yet. It whipped around Hall's neck in a loathsome coil and squeezed as the teeth sought the soft spot under his neck. It wriggled and flapped with its membranous wings, clutching the tatters of his shirt for purchase.

Hall brought the nozzle of the hose up blindly and struck at its yielding body again and again. It fell away and he trampled it beneath his feet, dimly aware that he was screaming. The rats ran in a flood over his feet, up his legs.

He broke into a staggering run, shaking some off. The others bit at his belly, his chest. One ran up his shoulder and pressed its questing muzzle into the cup of his ear.

He ran into the second bat. It roosted on his head for a moment, squealing, and then ripped away a flap of Hall's scalp.

He felt his body growing numb. His ears filled with the screech and yammer of many rats. He gave one last heave, stumbled over furry bodies, fell to his knees. He began to laugh, a high, screaming sound.

**Five A.M., Thursday.**

'Somebody better go down there,' Brochu said tentatively.

'Not me,' Wisconsky whispered. 'Not me.'

'No, not you, jelly belly,' Ippeston said with contempt.

'Well, let's go,' Brogan said, bringing up another hose. 'Me, Ippeson, Dangerfield, Nedeau. Stevenson, go up to the office and get a few more lights.'

Ippeson looked down into the darkness thoughtfully. 'Maybe they stopped for a smoke,' he said. 'A few rats, what the hell.'

Stevenson came back with the lights; a few moments later they started down.

## NIGHT SURF

After the guy was dead and the smell of his burning flesh was off the air, we all went back down to the beach. Corey had his radio, one of those suitcase-sized transistor jobs that take about forty batteries and also make and play tapes. You couldn't say the sound reproduction was great, but it sure was loud. Corey had been well-to-do before A6, but stuff like that didn't matter any more. Even his big radio/tape-player was hardly more than a nice-looking hunk of junk. There were only two radio stations left on the air that we could get. One was WKDM in Portsmouth – some backwoods deejay who had gone nutty-religious. He'd play a Perry Como record, say a prayer, bawl, play a Johnny Ray record, read from Psalms (complete with each 'selah', just like James Dean in *East of Eden*), then bawl some more. Happy-time stuff like that. One day he sang 'Bringing in the Sheaves' in a cracked, mouldy voice that sent Needles and me into hysterics.

The Massachusetts station was better, but we could only get it at night. It was a bunch of kids. I guess they took over the transmitting facilities of WRKO or WBZ after everybody left or died. They only gave gag call letters, like WDOPE or KUNT or WA6 or stuff like that. Really funny, you know – you could die laughing. That was the one we were listening to on the way back to the beach. I was holding hands with Susie; Kelly and Joan were ahead of us, and Needles was already over the brow of the point and out

of sight. Corey was bringing up the rear, swinging his radio. The Stones were singing 'Angie'.

'Do you *love* me?' Susie was asking. 'That's all I want to know, do you *love* me?' Susie needed constant reassurance. I was her teddy bear.

'No,' I said. She was getting fat, and if she lived long enough, which wasn't likely, she would get really flabby. She was already mouthy.

'You're rotten,' she said, and put a hand to her face. Her lacquered fingernails twinkled dimly with the half-moon that had risen about an hour ago.

'Are you going to cry again?'

'Shut up!' She sounded like she was going to cry again, all right.

We came over the ridge and I paused. I always have to pause. Before A6, this had been a public beach. Tourists, picnickers, runny-nosed kids and fat baggy grandmothers with sunburned elbows. Candy wrappers and popsicle sticks in the sand, all the beautiful people necking on their beach blankets, intermingled stench of exhaust from the parking lot, seaweed, and Coppertone oil.

But now all the dirt and all the crap was gone. The ocean had eaten it, all of it, as casually as you might eat a handful of Cracker Jacks. There were no people to come back and dirty it again. Just us, and we weren't enough to make much mess. We loved the beach too, I guess – hadn't we just offered it a kind of sacrifice? Even Susie, little bitch Susie with her fat ass and her cranberry bellbottoms.

The sand was white and duned, marked only by the high-tide line – twisted skein of seaweed, kelp, hunks of driftwood. The moonlight stitched inky crescent-shaped shadows and folds across everything. The deserted life-guard tower stood white and skeletal some fifty yards from the bathhouse towards the sky like a finger bone.

And the surf, the night surf, throwing up great bursts of foam, breaking against the headlands for as far as we could

see in endless attacks. ~~May~~Be that water had been halfway to England the night before.

“‘Angie’, by the Stones,’ the cracked voice on Corey’s radio said. ‘I’m sureya dug that one, a blast from the past that’s a golden gas, straight from the grooveyard, a platta that mattas. I’m Bobby. This was supposed to be Fred’s night, but Fred got the flu. He’s all swelled up.’ Susie giggled then, with the first tears still on her eyelashes. I started towards the beach a little faster to keep her quiet.

‘Wait up!’ Corey called. ‘Bernie? Hey, Bernie, wait up!’

The guy on the radio was reading some dirty limericks, and a girl in the background asked him where did he put the beer. He said something back, but by that time we were on the beach. I looked back to see how Corey was doing. He was coming down on his backside, as usual, and he looked so ludicrous I felt a little sorry for him.

‘Run with me,’ I said to Susie.

‘Why?’

I slapped her on the can and she squealed. ‘Just because it feels good to run.’

We ran. She fell behind, panting like a horse and calling for me to slow down, but I put her out of my head. The wind rushed past my ears and blew the hair off my forehead. I could smell the salt in the air, sharp and tart. The surf pounded. The waves were like foamed black glass. I kicked off my rubber sandals and pounded across the sand barefoot, not minding the sharp digs of an occasional shell. My blood roared.

And then there was the lean-to with Needles already inside and Kelly and Joan standing beside it, holding hands and looking at the water. I did a forward roll, feeling sand go down the back of my shirt, and fetched up against Kelly’s legs. He fell on top of me and rubbed my face in the sand while Joan laughed.

We got up and grinned at each other. Susie had given up running and was plodding towards us. Corey had almost caught up to her.

'Some fire,' Kelly said.

'Do you think he came all the way from New York, like he said?' Joan asked.

'I don't know.' I couldn't see that it mattered anyway. He had been behind the wheel of a big Lincoln when we found him, semi-conscious and raving. His head was bloated to the size of a football and his neck looked like a sausage. He had Captain Trips and not far to go, either. So we took him up to the Point that overlooks the beach and burned him. He said his name was Alvin Sackheim. He kept calling for his grandmother. He thought Susie was his grandmother. This struck her funny, God knows why. The strangest things strike Susie funny.

It was Corey's idea to burn him up, but it started off as a joke. He had read all those books about witchcraft and black magic at college, and he kept leering at us in the dark beside Alvin Sackheim's Lincoln and telling us that if we made a sacrifice to the dark gods, maybe the spirits would keep protecting us against A6.

Of course none of us really believed that bullshit, but the talk got more and more serious. It was a new thing to do, and finally we went ahead and did it. We tied him to the observation gadget up there – you put a dime in it and on a clear day you can see all the way to Portland Headlight. We tied him with our belts, and then we went rooting around for dry brush and hunks of driftwood like kids playing a new kind of hide-and-seek. All the time we were doing it Alvin Sackheim just sort of leaned there and mumbled to his grandmother. Susie's eyes got very bright and she was breathing fast. It was really turning her on. When we were down in the ravine on the other side of the outcrop she leaned against me and kissed me. She was wearing too much lipstick and it was like kissing a greasy plate.

I pushed her away and that was when she started pouting.

We went back up, all of us, and piled dead branches and twigs up to Alvin Sackheim's waist. Needles lit the pyre with his Zippo, and it went up fast. At the end, just before

his hair caught on fire, the guy began to scream. There was a smell just like sweet Chinese pork.

'Got a cigarette, Bernie?' Needles asked.

'There's about fifty cartons right behind you.'

He grinned and slapped a mosquito that was probing his arm. 'Don't want to move.'

I gave him a smoke and sat down. Susie and I met Needles in Portland. He was sitting on the kerb in front of the State Theatre, playing Leadbelly tunes on a big old Gibson guitar he had looted someplace. The sound echoed up and down Congress Street as if he were playing in a concert hall.

Susie stopped in front of us, still out of breath. 'You're rotten, Bernie.'

'Come on, Sue. Turn the record over. That side stinks.'

'Bastard. Stupid, unfeeling son of a bitch. *Creep!*'

'Go away,' I said, 'or I'll black your eye, Susie. See if I don't.'

She started to cry again. She was really good at it. Corey came up and tried to put an arm around her. She elbowed him in the crotch and he spit in her face.

'I'll *kill* you!' She came at him, screaming and weeping, making propellers with her hands. Corey backed off, almost fell, then turned tail and ran. Susie followed him, hurling hysterical obscenities. Needles put back his head and laughed. The sound of Corey's radio came back to us faintly over the surf.

Kelly and Joan had wandered off. I could see them down by the edge of the water, walking with their arms around each other's waist. They looked like an ad in a travel agent's window – *Fly to Beautiful St Lorca*. It was all right. They had a good thing.

'Bernie?'

'What?' I sat and smoked and thought about Needles flipping back the top of his Zippo, spinning the wheel, making fire with flint and steel like a caveman.

'I've got it,' Needles said.

'Yeah?' I looked at him. 'Are you sure?'

'Sure I am. My head aches. My stomach aches. Hurts to piss.'

'Maybe it's just Hong Kong flu. Susie had Hong Kong flu. She wanted a Bible.' I laughed. That had been while we were still at the University, about a week before they closed it down for good, a month before they started carrying bodies away in dump trucks and burying them in mass graves with payloaders.

'Look.' He lit a match and held it under the angle of his jaw. I could see the first triangular smudges, the first swelling. It was A6, all right.

'Okay,' I said.

'I don't feel so bad,' he said. 'In my mind, I mean. You, though. You think about it a lot. I can tell.'

'No I don't.' A lie.

'Sure you do. Like that guy tonight. You're thinking about that, too. We probably did him a favour, when you get right down to it. I don't think he even knew it was happening.'

'He knew.'

He shrugged and turned on his side. 'It doesn't matter.'

We smoked and I watched the surf come in and go out. Needles and Captain Trips. That made everything real all over again. It was late August already, and in a couple of weeks the first chill of fall would be creeping in. Time to move inside someplace. Winter. Dead by Christmas, maybe, all of us. In somebody's front room with Corey's expensive radio/tape-player on top of a book-case full of Reader's Digest Condensed Books and the weak winter sun lying on the rug in meaningless windowpane patterns.

The vision was clear enough to make me shudder. Nobody should think about winter in August. It's like a goose walking over your grave.

Needles laughed. 'See? You *do* think about it.'

What could I say? I stood up. 'Going to look for Susie.'

'Maybe we're the last people on earth, Bernie. Did you ever think of that?' In the faint moonlight he already looked half dead, with circles under his eyes and pallid, unmoving fingers like pencils.

I walked down to the water and looked out across it. There was nothing to see but the restless, moving humps of the waves, topped by delicate curls of foam. The thunder of the breakers was tremendous down here, bigger than the world. Like standing inside a thunderstorm. I closed my eyes and rocked on my bare feet. The sand was cold and damp and packed. And if we were the last people on earth, so what? This would go on as long as there was a moon to pull the water.

Susie and Corey were up the beach. Susie was riding him as if he were a bucking bronc, pounding his head into the running boil of the water. Corey was flailing and splashing. They were both soaked. I walked down and pushed her off with my foot. Corey splashed away on all fours, spluttering and whoofing.

'I hate you!' Susie screamed at me. Her mouth was a dark grinning crescent. It looked like the entrance to a fun house. When I was a kid my mother used to take us kids to Harrison State Park and there was a fun house with a big clown face on the front, and you walked in through the mouth.

'Come on, Susie. Up, Fido.' I held out my hand. She took it doubtfully and stood up. There was damp sand clotted on her blouse and skin.

'You didn't have to push me, Bernie. You don't ever —'

'Come on.' She wasn't like a jukebox; you never had to put in a dime and she never came unplugged.

We walked up the beach towards the main concession. The man who ran the place had had a small overhead apartment. There was a bed. She didn't really deserve a bed, but Needles was right about that. It didn't matter. No one was really scoring the game any more.

The stairs went up the side of the building, but I paused

for just a minute to look in the broken window at the dusty wares inside that no one had cared enough about to loot – stacks of sweatshirts ('Anson Beach' and a picture of sky and waves printed on the front), glittering bracelets that would green the wrist on the second day, bright junk earrings, beachballs, dirty greeting cards, badly painted ceramic madonnas, plastic vomit (*So realistic! Try it on your wife!*), Fourth of July sparklers for a Fourth that never was, beach towels with a voluptuous girl in a bikini standing amid the names of a hundred famous resort areas, pennants (*Souvenir of Anson Beach and Park*), balloons, bathing suits. There was a snack bar up front with a big sign saying TRY OUR CLAM CAKE SPECIAL.

I used to come to Anson Beach a lot when I was still in high school. That was seven years before A6, and I was going with a girl named Maureen. She was a big girl. She had a pink checked bathing suit. I used to tell her it looked like a tablecloth. We had walked along the boardwalk in front of this place, barefoot, the boards hot and sandy beneath our heels. We had never tried the clam cake special.

'What are you looking at?'

'Nothing. Come on.'

I had sweaty, ugly dreams about Alvin Sackheim. He was propped behind the wheel of his shiny yellow Lincoln, talking about his grandmother. He was nothing but a bloated, blackened head and a charred skeleton. He smelled burnt. He talked on and on, and after a while I couldn't make out a single word. I woke up breathing hard.

Susie was sprawled across my thighs, pale and bloated. My watch said 3.50, but it had stopped. It was still dark out. The surf pounded and smashed. High tide. Make it 4.15. Light soon. I got out of bed and went to the doorway. The sea breeze felt fine against my hot body. In spite of it all I didn't want to die.

I went over in the corner and grabbed a beer. There were

three or four cases of Bud stacked against the wall. It was warm, because there was no electricity. I don't mind warm beer like some people do, though. It just foams a little more. Beer is beer. I went back out on the landing and sat down and pulled the ring tab and drank up.

So here we were, with the whole human race wiped out, not by atomic weapons or bio-warfare or pollution or anything *grand* like that. *Just the flu.* I'd like to put down a huge plaque somewhere, in the Bonneville Salt Flats, maybe. Bronze Square. Three miles on a side. And in big raised letters it would say, for the benefit of any landing aliens: JUST THE FLU.

I tossed the beer can over the side. It landed with a hollow clank on the cement walk that went around the building. The lean-to was a dark triangle on the sand. I wondered if Needles was awake. I wondered if I would be.

'Bernie?'

She was standing in the doorway wearing one of my shirts. I hate that. She sweats like a pig.

'You don't like me much any more, do you, Bernie?'

I didn't say anything. There were times when I could still feel sorry for everything. She didn't deserve me any more than I deserved her.

'Can I sit down with you?'

'I doubt if it would be wide enough for both of us.'

She made a choked hiccuping noise and started to go back inside.

'Needles has got A6,' I said.

She stopped and looked at me. Her face was very still.  
'Don't joke, Bernie.'

I lit a cigarette.

'He can't! He had -'

'Yes, he had A2. Hong Kong flu. Just like you and me and Corey and Kelly and Joan.'

'But that would mean he isn't -'

'Immune.'

'Yes. Then we could get it.'

'Maybe he lied when he said he had A2. So we'd take him along with us that time,' I said.

Relief spilled across her face. 'Sure, that's it. I would have lied if it had been me. Nobody likes to be alone, do they?' She hesitated. 'Coming back to bed?'

'Not just now.'

She went inside. I didn't have to tell her that A2 was no guarantee against A6. She knew that. She had just blocked it out. I sat and watched the surf. It was really up. Years ago, Anson had been the only halfway decent surfing spot in the state. The Point was a dark, jutting hump against the sky. I thought I could see the upright that was the observation post, but it probably was just imagination. Sometimes Kelly took Joan up to the point. I didn't think they were up there tonight.

I put my face in my hands and clutched it, feeling the skin, its grain and texture. It was all narrowing so swiftly, and it was all so mean – there was no dignity in it.

The surf coming in, coming in, coming in. Limitless. Clean and deep. We had come here in the summer, Maureen and I, the summer after high school, the summer before college and reality and A6 coming out of South-east Asia and covering the world like a pall, July, we had eaten pizza and listened to her radio, I had put oil on her back, she had put oil on mine, the air had been hot, the sand bright, the sun like a burning glass.

## I AM THE DOORWAY

Richard and I sat on my porch, looking out over the dunes to the Gulf. The smoke from his cigar drifted mellowly in the air, keeping the mosquitoes at a safe distance. The water was a cool aqua, the sky a deeper, truer blue. It was a pleasant combination.

'You are the doorway,' Richard repeated thoughtfully. 'You are sure you killed the boy - you didn't just dream it?'

'I didn't dream it. And I didn't kill him, either - I told you that. They did. I am the doorway.'

Richard sighed. 'You buried him?'

'Yes.'

'You remember where?'

'Yes.' I reached into my breast pocket and got a cigarette. My hands were awkward with their covering of bandages. They itched abominably. 'If you want to see it, you'll have to get the dune buggy. You can't roll this -' I indicated my wheelchair - 'through the sand.' Richard's dune buggy was a 1959 VW with pillow-sized tyres. He collected driftwood in it. Ever since he retired from the real estate business in Maryland he had been living on Key Caroline and building driftwood sculptures which he sold to the winter tourists at shameless prices.

He puffed his cigar and looked out at the Gulf. 'Not yet. Will you tell me once more?'

I sighed and tried to light my cigarette. He took the matches away from me and did it himself. I puffed twice, dragging deep. The itch in my fingers was maddening.

'All right,' I said. 'Last night at seven I was out here, looking at the Gulf and smoking, just like now, and -'

'Go further back,' he invited.

'Further?'

'Tell me about the flight.'

I shook my head. 'Richard, we've been through it and through it. There's nothing -'

The seamed and fissured face was as enigmatic as one of his own driftwood sculptures. 'You may remember,' he said. 'Now you may remember.'

'Do you think so?'

'Possibly. And when you're through, we can look for the grave.'

'The grave,' I said. It had a hollow, horrible ring, darker than anything, darker even than all that terrible ocean Cory and I had sailed through five years ago. Dark, dark, dark.

Beneath the bandages, my new eyes stared blindly into the darkness the bandages forced on them. They itched.

Cory and I were boosted into orbit by the Saturn 16, the one all the commentators called the Empire State Building booster. It was a big beast, all right. It made the old Saturn 1-B look like a Redstone, and it took off from a bunker two hundred feet deep - it had to, to keep from taking half of Cape Kennedy with it.

We swung around the earth, verifying all our systems, and then did our inject. Headed out for Venus. We left a Senate fighting over an appropriations bill for further deep-space exploration, and a bunch of NASA people praying that we would find something, anything.

'It don't matter what,' Don Lovinger, Project Zeus's private whiz kid, was very fond of saying when he'd had a few. 'You got all the gadgets, plus five souped-up TV cameras and a nifty little telescope with a zillion lenses and filters. Find some gold or platinum. Better yet, find some nice, dumb little blue men for us to study and exploit and

feel superior to. Anything. Even the ghost of Howdy Doody would be a start.'

Cory and I were anxious enough to oblige, if we could. Nothing had worked for the deep-space programme. From Borman, Anders, and Lovell, who orbited the moon in '68 and found an empty, forbidding world that looked like dirty beach sand, to Markhan and Jacks, who touched down on Mars eleven years later to find an arid wasteland of frozen sand and a few struggling lichens, the deep-space programme had been an expensive bust. And there had been casualties – Pederson and Lederer, eternally circling the sun when all at once nothing worked on the second-to-last Apollo flight. John Davis, whose little orbiting observatory was holed by a meteoroid in a one-in-a-thousand fluke. No, the space programme was hardly swinging along. The way things looked, the Venus orbit might be our last chance to say we told you so.

It was sixteen days out – we ate a lot of concentrates, played a lot of gin, and swapped a cold back and forth – and from the tech side it was a milk run. We lost an air-moisture converter on the third day out, went to backup, and that was all, except for nits and nats, until re-entry. We watched Venus grow from a star to a quarter to a milky crystal ball, swapped jokes with Huntsville Control, listened to tapes of Wagner and the Beatles, tended to automated experiments which had to do with everything from measurements of the solar wind to deep-space navigation. We did two midcourse corrections, both of them infinitesimal, and nine days into the flight Cory went outside and banged on the retractable DESA until it decided to operate. There was nothing else out of the ordinary until . . .

'DESA,' Richard said. 'What's that?'

'An experiment that didn't pan out. NASA-ese for Deep Space Antenna – we were broadcasting pi in high-frequency pulses for anyone who cared to listen.' I rubbed my fingers against my pants, but it was no good; if anything, it made it worse. 'Same idea as that radio telescope in West

Virginia – you know, the one that listens to the stars. Only instead of listening, we were transmitting, primarily to the deeper space planets – Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus. If there's any intelligent life out there, it was taking a nap.'

'Only Cory went out?'

'Yes. And if he brought in any interstellar plague, the telemetry didn't show it.'

'Still –'

'It doesn't matter,' I said crossly. 'Only the here and now matters. They killed the boy last night, Richard. It wasn't a nice thing to watch – or feel. His head . . . it exploded. As if someone had scooped out his brains and put a hand grenade in his skull.'

'Finish the story,' he said.

I laughed hollowly. 'What's to tell?'

We went into an eccentric orbit around the planet. It was radical and deteriorating, three twenty by seventy-six miles. That was on the first swing. The second swing our apogee was even higher, the perigee lower. We had a max of four orbits. We made all four. We got a good look at the planet. Also over six hundred stills and God knows how many feet of film.

The cloud cover is equal parts methane, ammonia, dust, and flying shit. The whole planet looks like the Grand Canyon in a wind tunnel. Cory estimated windspeed at about 600 mph near the surface. Our probe beeped all the way down and then went out with a squawk. We saw no vegetation and no sign of life. Spectroscope indicated only traces of the valuable minerals. And that was Venus. Nothing but nothing – except it scared me. It was like circling a haunted house in the middle of deep space. I know how unscientific that sounds, but I was scared gutless until we got out of there. I think if our rockets hadn't gone off, I would have cut my throat on the way down. It's not like the moon. The moon is desolate but somehow antisep-tic. That world we saw was utterly unlike anything that

anyone has ever seen. Maybe it's a good thing that cloud cover is there. It was like a skull that's been picked clean – that's the closest I can get.

On the way back we heard the Senate had voted to halve space-exploration funds. Cory said something like 'looks like we're back in the weather-satellite business, Artie.' But I was almost glad. Maybe we don't belong out there.

Twelve days later Cory was dead and I was crippled for life. We bought all our trouble on the way down. The chute was fouled. How's that for life's little ironies? We'd been in space for over a month, gone further than any humans had ever gone, and it all ended the way it did because some guy was in a hurry for his coffee break and let a few lines get fouled.

We came down hard. A guy that was in one of the copters said it looked like a gigantic baby falling out of the sky, with the placenta trailing after it. I lost consciousness when we hit.

I came to when they were taking me across the deck of the *Portland*. They hadn't even had a chance to roll up the red carpet we were supposed to've walked on. I was bleeding. Bleeding and being hustled up to the infirmary over a red carpet that didn't look anywhere near as red as I did . . .

' . . . I was in Bethesda for two years. They gave me the Medal of Honor and a lot of money and this wheelchair. I came down here the next year. I like to watch the rockets take off.'

'I know,' Richard said. He paused. 'Show me your hands.'

'No.' It came out very quickly and sharply. 'I can't let them see. I've told you that.'

'It's been five years,' Richard said. 'Why now, Arthur? Can you tell me that?'

'I don't know. I don't know! Maybe whatever it is has a long gestation period. Or who's to say I even got it out

there? Whatever it was might have entered me in Fort Lauderdale. Or right here on this porch, for all I know.'

Richard sighed and looked out over the water, now reddish with the late-evening sun. 'I'm trying. Arthur, I don't want to think that you are losing your mind.'

'If I have to, I'll show you my hands,' I said. It cost me an effort to say it. 'But only if I have to.'

Richard stood up and found his cane. He looked old and frail. 'I'll get the dune buggy. We'll look for the boy.'

'Thank you, Richard.'

He walked out towards the rutted dirt track that led to his cabin – I could just see the roof of it over the Big Dune, the one that runs almost the whole length of Key Caroline. Over the water towards the Cape, the sky had gone an ugly plum colour, and the sound of thunder came faintly to my ears.

I didn't know the boy's name but I saw him every now and again, walking along the beach at sunset, with his sieve under his arm. He was tanned almost black by the sun, and all he was ever clad in was a frayed pair of denim cutoffs. On the far side of Key Caroline there is a public beach, and an enterprising young man can make perhaps as much as five dollars on a good day, patiently sieving the sand for buried quarters or dimes. Every now and then I would wave to him and he would wave back, both of us non-committal, strangers yet brothers, year-round dwellers set against a sea of money spending, Cadillac-driving, loud-mouthed tourists. I imagine he lived in the small village clustered around the post office about a half mile further down.

When he passed by that evening I had already been on the porch for an hour, immobile, watching. I had taken off the bandages earlier. The itching had been intolerable, and it was always better when they could look through their eyes.

It was a feeling like no other in the world – as if I were a portal just slightly ajar through which they were peeking at

a world which they hated and feared. But the worst part was that I could see, too, in a way. Imagine your mind transported into a body of a housefly, a housefly looking into your own face with a thousand eyes. Then perhaps you can begin to see why I kept my hands bandaged even when there was no one around to see them.

It began in Miami. I had business there with a man named Cresswell, an investigator from the Navy Department. He checks up on me once a year – for a while I was as close as anyone ever gets to the classified stuff our space programme has. I don't know just what it is he looks for; a shifty gleam in the eye, maybe, or maybe a scarlet letter on my forehead. God knows why. My pension is large enough to be almost embarrassing.

Cresswell and I were sitting on the terrace of his hotel room, sipping drinks and discussing the future of the US space programme. It was about three-fifteen. My fingers began to itch. It wasn't a bit gradual. It was switched on like electric current. I mentioned it to Cresswell.

'So you picked up some poison ivy on that scrofulous little island,' he said, grinning.

'The only foliage on Key Caroline is a little palmetto scrub,' I said. 'Maybe it's the seven-year itch.' I looked down at my hands. Perfectly ordinary hands. But itchy.

Later in the afternoon I signed the same old paper ('I do solemnly swear that I have neither received nor disclosed and divulged information which would . . .') and drove myself back to the Key. I've got an old Ford, equipped with hand-operated brake and accelerator. I love it – it makes me feel self-sufficient.

It's a long drive back, down Route 1, and by the time I got off the big road and on to the Key Caroline exit ramp, I was nearly out of my mind. My hands itched maddeningly. If you have ever suffered through the healing of a deep cut or a surgical incision, you may have some idea of the kind of itch I mean. Live things seemed to be crawling and boring in my flesh.

The sun was almost down and I looked at my hands carefully in the glow of the dash lights. The tips of them were red now, red in tiny, perfect circlets, just above the pad where the fingerprint is, where you get calluses if you play guitar. There were also red circles of infection on the space between the first and second joint of each thumb and finger, and on the skin between the second joint and the knuckle. I pressed my right fingers to my lips and withdrew them quickly, with a sudden loathing. A feeling of dumb horror had risen in my throat, woollen and choking. The flesh where the red spots had appeared was hot, feverish, and the flesh was soft and gelid, like the flesh of an apple gone rotten.

I drove the rest of the way trying to persuade myself that I had indeed caught poison ivy somehow. But in the back of my mind there was another ugly thought. I had an aunt, back in my childhood, who lived the last ten years of her life closed off from the world in an upstairs room. My mother took her meals up, and her name was a forbidden topic. I found out later that she had Hansen's disease – leprosy.

When I got home I called Dr Flanders on the mainland. I got his answering service instead. Dr Flanders was on a fishing cruise, but if it was urgent, Dr Ballanger –

‘When will Dr Flanders be back?’

‘Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Would that –’

‘Sure.’

I hung up slowly, then dialled Richard. I let it ring a dozen times before hanging up. After that I sat indecisive for a while. The itching had deepened. It seemed to emanate from the flesh itself.

I rolled my wheelchair over to the bookcase and pulled down the battered medical encyclopedia that I'd had for years. The book was maddeningly vague. It could have been anything, or nothing.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I could hear the old ship's clock ticking on the shelf across the room. There was

the high, thin drone of a jet on its way to Miami. There was the soft whisper of my own breath.

I was still looking at the book.

The realization crept on me, then sank home with a frightening rush. My eyes were closed, but I was still looking at the book. What I was seeing was smeary and monstrous, the distorted, fourth-dimensional counterpart of a book, yet unmistakable for all that.

And I was not the only one watching.

I snapped my eyes open, feeling the constriction of my heart. The sensation subsided a little, but not entirely. I was looking at the book, seeing the print and diagrams with my own eyes, perfectly normal everyday experience, and I was also seeing it from a different, lower angle and seeing it with other eyes. Seeing not a book but an alien thing, something of monstrous shape and ominous intent.

I raised my hands slowly to my face, catching an eerie vision of my living room turned into a horror house.

I screamed.

There were eyes peering up at me through splits in the flesh of my fingers. And even as I watched the flesh was dilating, retreating, as they pushed their mindless way up to the surface.

But that was not what made me scream. I had looked into my own face and seen a monster.

The dune buggy nosed over the hill and Richard brought it to a halt next to the porch. The motor gunned and roared choppily. I rolled my wheelchair down the inclined plane to the right of the regular steps and Richard helped me in.

‘All right, Arthur,’ he said. ‘It’s your party. Where to?’

I pointed down towards the water, where the Big Dune family begins to peter out. Richard nodded. The rear wheels spun sand and we were off. I usually found time to rib Richard about his driving, but I didn’t bother tonight. There was too much else to think about – and to feel: they

didn't want the dark, and I could feel them straining to see through the bandages, willing me to take them off.

The dune buggy bounced and roared through the sand towards the water, seeming almost to take flight from the tops of the small dunes. To the left the sun was going down in bloody glory. Straight ahead and across the water, the thunderclouds were beating their way towards us. Lightning forked at the water.

'Off to your right,' I said. 'By that lean-to.'

Richard brought the dune buggy to a sand-spraying halt beside the rotted remains of the lean-to, reached into the back, and brought out a spade. I winced when I saw it. 'Where?' Richard asked expressionlessly.

'Right there.' I pointed to the place.

He got out and walked slowly through the sand to the spot, hesitated for a second, then plunged the shovel into the sand. It seemed that he dug for a very long time. The sand he was throwing back over his shoulder looked damp and moist. The thunderheads were darker, higher, and the water looked angry and implacable under their shadow and the reflected glow of the sunset.

I knew long before he stopped digging that he was not going to find the boy. They had moved him. I hadn't bandaged my hands last night, so they could see – and act. If they had been able to use me to kill the boy, they could use me to move him, even while I slept.

'There's no boy, Arthur.' He threw the dirty shovel into the dune buggy and sat tiredly on the seat. The coming storm cast marching, crescent-shaped shadows along the sand. The rising breeze rattled sand against the buggy's rusted body. My fingers itched.

'They used me to move him,' I said dully. 'They're getting the upper hand, Richard. They're forcing their doorway open, a little at a time. A hundred times a day I find myself standing in front of some perfectly familiar object – a spatula, a picture, even a can of beans – with no idea how I got there, holding my hands out, showing it to

them, seeing it as they do, as an obscenity, something twisted and grotesque —'

'Arthur,' he said. 'Arthur, don't. Don't.' In the failing light his face was wan with compassion. 'Standing in front of something, you said. Moving the boy's body, you said. *But you can't walk, Arthur.* You're dead from the waist down.'

I touched the dashboard of the dune buggy. 'This is dead, too. But when you enter it, you can make it go. You could make it kill. It couldn't stop you even if it wanted to.' I could hear my voice rising hysterically. 'I am the doorway, can't you understand that? They killed the boy, Richard! They moved the body!'

'I think you'd better see a medical man,' he said quietly. 'Let's go back. Let's —'

'Check! Check on the boy, then! find out —'

'You said you didn't even know his name.'

'He must have been from the village. It's a small village. Ask —'

'I talked to Maud Harrington on the phone when I got the dune buggy. If anyone in the state has a longer nose, I've not come across her. I asked if she'd heard of anyone's boy not coming home last night. She said she hadn't.'

'But he's a local! He has to be!'

He reached for the ignition switch but I stopped him. He turned to look at me and I began to unwrap my hands.

From the Gulf, thunder muttered and growled.

I didn't go to the doctor and I didn't call Richard back. I spent three weeks with my hands bandaged every time I went out. Three weeks just blindly hoping it would go away. It wasn't a rational act; I can admit that. If I had been a whole man who didn't need a wheelchair for legs or who had spent a normal life in a normal occupation, I might have gone to Doc Flanders or to Richard. I still might have, if it hadn't been for the memory of my aunt, shunned, virtually a prisoner, being eaten alive by her own ailing flesh. So I kept a desperate silence and prayed that I

who I wake up some morning and find it had been an evil dream.

And little by little I felt them. Them. An anonymous intelligence. I never really wondered what they looked like or where they had come from. It was more. I was their doorway and their window on the world. I got enough feedback from them to feel their revulsion and horror to know that our world was very different from theirs. Enough feedback to feel their blind hate. But still they watched. Their flesh was embedded in my own. I began to realize that they were using me, actually manipulating me.

When the boy passed, raising one hand in his usual noncommittal salute, I had just about decided to get in touch with Cresswell at his Navy Department number. Richard had been right about one thing. I was certain that whatever had got hold of me had done it in deep space or in that weird orbit around Venus. The Navy would study me but they would not break it to me. I wouldn't have to wake up any more into the creaking darkness and stifle a scream as I felt them watching, watching, watching.

My hands went out towards the boy and I realized that I had not bandaged them. I could see the eyes in the dying light, watching silently. They were large, dilated, golden irised. I had poked one of them against the tip of a pencil once, and had felt excruciating agony slam up my arm. The eye seemed to glare at me with a chilled hatred that was worse than physical pain. I did not probe again.

And now they were watching the boy. I felt my mind slide step. A moment later my control was gone. The door was open. I lurched across the sand towards him, legs quivering uselessly, so much driven deadwood. My own eyes seemed to close and I saw only with those alien eyes. Saw a monster but a bluster seascape overtopped with a sky like a great purple way. Saw a leaning eroded shack that might have been the carcass of some unknown, flesh-devouring creature. Saw an abominated creature that moved and respiration carried a device of wood and wire.

under its arm a device constructed of geometrically impossible right angles

I wonder what he thought that wretched unnamed boy with his sieve under his arm and his pockets bulging with an odd conglomerate of sandy tourist coins what he thought when he saw me lurching at him like a band conductor stretching out his hands over a frantic orchestra what he thought as the last of the light fell across my hands red and spit and shining with their burden of eyes what he thought when the hands made that sudden flailing gesture in the air just before his head burst

I know what I thought

I thought I had peeked over the rim of the universe and into the fires of hell itself

The wind pulled at the bandages and made them into tiny, whipping streamers as I unwrapped them. The clouds had blotted out the red remnants of the sunset and the dunes were dark and shadow-cast. The clouds raced and boiled above us

You must promise me one thing Richard I said over the rising wind 'You must run if it seems I might try to burn you. Do you understand that?

Yes. His open-throated shirt whipped and rippled with the wind. His face was set, his own eyes little more than sockets in ear y dark

The last of the bandages fell away

I looked at Richard and they looked at Richard. I saw a face I had known for five years and come to love. They saw a distorted living monolith

'You see them, I said hoarsely. Now you see them'

He took an involuntary step backwards. His face became stained with a sudden unbelieving terror. Lightning slashed out of the sky. Thunder walked in the clouds and the water had gone black as the river Styx

'Arthur -'

How hideous he was. How could I have lived near him

spoken with him? He was not a creature but mere pestilence. He was -

'Run, Run, Richard!'

And he did run. He ran in huge bounding leaps. He became a scat-fish against the coming sky. My hand flew up, flew over my head in a screaming, artesque ges are the fingers reaching to the only familiar thing in this high-mate world - reaching to the clouds.

And the clouds answered.

There was a huge blue-white streak of lightning that seemed like the end of the world. It struck Richard. It enveloped him. The last thing I remember is the electric stench of ozone and burnt flesh.

When I awoke I was sitting calmly on my porch looking out towards the Big Dune. The storm had passed and the air was pleasantly cool. There was a tiny sliver of moon. The sand was very hot - no sign of Richard or of the dune buggy.

I looked down at my hands. The eyes were open but glazed. They had exhausted themselves. They dozed.

I knew we'd enough what had to be done. Before the door could be wedged open any further, it had to be kicked. For ever. Already I could notice the first signs of structural change in the hands themselves. The fingers were beginning to shorten - and to change.

There was a small hearth in the living room and in season I had been in the habit of lighting a fire against the damp Florida cold. I lit one now in living with haste. I had no idea when they might wake up to what I was doing.

When it was burning well I went out back to the kerosene drum and soaked both hands. They came awake immediately screaming with agony. I almost didn't make it back to the living room and to the fire.

But I did make it.

That was all seven years ago.

I'm still here still watching the rockets take off. There

have been more of them lately. This is a space-minded administration. There has even been talk of another series of manned Venus probes.

I found out the boy's name, not that it matters. He was from the village, just as I thought. But his mother had expected him to stay with a friend on the mainland that night and the alarm was not raised until the following Monday. Richard, well, everyone thought Richard was an odd duck anyway. They suspect he may have gone back to Maryland or taken up with some woman.

As for me, I am tolerated, although I have quite a reputation for eccentricity myself. After all, how many ex-astronauts regularly write their elected Washington officials with the idea that space exploration money could be better spent elsewhere?

I get along just fine with these hooks. There was terrible pain for the first year or so, but the human body can adjust to almost anything. I shave with them and even tie my own shoelaces. And as you can see, my typing is nice and even. I don't expect to have any trouble putting the shotgun into my mouth or pulling the trigger. It started again three weeks ago, you see.

There is a perfect circle of twelve golden eyes on my chest.

## THE MANGER

Officer Hanton got to the laundry just as the ambulance was leaving slowly with no siren or flashing lights. Ominous. Inside the office was studded with maling silent people some of them weeping. The plant itself was empty the big automatic washers at the far end had not even been shut down. It made Hanton very wary. The crowd should be at the scene of the accident not in the office. It was the way things worked the human animal had a built in urge to view the remains. A very bad one. Then Hanton felt his stomach tighten as it always did when the accident was very bad. Fourteen years of cleaning human litter from high ways and streets and the sewers at the bases of very tall buildings had not been able to erase that little hitch in the belly as if something evil had clotted there.

A man in a white shirt saw Hanton and walked towards him reluctantly. He was a buffalo of a man with head thrust forward between shoulders nose and cheeks vein-broken either from high blood pressure or too many conversations with the brown bottle. He was trying to frame words but after two tries Hanton cut him off briskly.

Are you the owner, Mr Gartley?

No... no. I'm Stanner, the foreman. Good this Hanton got out his notebook. Please show me the scene of the accident, Mr Stanner, and tell me what happened.

Stanner seemed to grow even more white. The patches in his nose and cheeks stood out like birthmarks. Do do I have to?

Man on raised his eyebrows. I'm afraid you do. The cat. I go, said it was serious.

Serious. Stanner seemed to be battling with his gorge for a moment his Adam's apple went up and down like a monkey on a stick. Mrs Frawley is dead. Jesus. I wish Bid Garley was here.'

'What happened?'

Stanner said. You better come over here.

He led Hanton past a row of hand presses a shirt flanging unit and then stopped by a laundry marking machine. He passed a shaky hand across his forehead. You'll have to go over by yourself. Officer. I can't look at it again. It makes me... I can't. I'm sorry.'

Hanton walked around the marking machine with a cold feeling of contempt for the man. They run a nose shop cut corners run live steam through home welded pipes they work with dangerous cleaning chemicals without the proper protection and finally someone gets hurt. Or gets dead. Then they can't look. They can't.

Hanton saw it.

The machine was still running. No one had shut it off. The machine he later came to know intimately the Hadley Watson Model 6 Speed Ironer and Folder. A long and clumsy name. The people who worked here in the steam and the wet had a better name for it. The mangler.

Hanton took a long frozen look and then he performed a first in his fourteen years as a law-enforcement officer. He turned around put a convulsive hand to his mouth and threw up.

You didn't much. Jackson said.

The women were inside doing dishes and talking babies while John Hanton and Mark Jackson sat in lawn chairs near the aromatic barbecue. Hanton sighed sadly at the inadvertent. He had eaten nothing.

There was a bad one today, he said. The worst. 'Car crash?'

## No Industrial 'Messy'?

Henton did not reply immediately, but his face made an involuntary wringing grimace. He got a beer out of the cooler between them, opened it, and emptied half of it. "Suppose you college profs don't know anything about industrial laundries?"

Jackson chuckled. "This one does. I spent a summer working in one as an undergraduate."

Then you know the machine they call the speed ironer?"

Jackson nodded. "Sure. They run damp flatwork through them, mostly sheets and then. A big long machine."

That's it," Henton said. "A woman named Adelie Frawley got caught in it at the Blue Ribbon Laundry across town. It sucked her right in."

Jackson looked suddenly ill. "But . . . that can't happen, Johnny. There's a safety bar. If one of the women feeding the machine accidentally gets a hand under it, the bar snaps up and stops the machine. At least that's how I remember it."

Henton nodded. "It's a state law. But it happened."

Henton closed his eyes and in the darkness he could see the Hadley Watson speed ironer again, as it had been that afternoon. It formed a long rectangular box in shape, thirty feet by six. At the feeder end, a moving canvas belt moved under the safety bar, up at a right angle, and then down. The belt carried the damp-dried, wrinkled sheets in continuous cycle over and under sixteen huge revolving cylinders that made up the main body of the machine. Over eight and under eight, pressed between them like thin ham between layers of superheated bread. Steam heat in the cylinders could be adjusted up to 400 degrees for maximum drying. The pressure on the sheets that rode the moving canvas belt was set at 500 pounds per square foot to get out every wrinkle.

And Mrs. Frawley, somehow, had been caught and dragged in. The steel asbestos jacketed pressurized cylinders had

been as red as barn paint and the rising steam from the machine had carried the sickening stench of hot blood. Bits of her white blouse and blue stockings, even ripped segments of her bra and panties, had been torn free and ejected from the machine's far end thirty feet down the bigger sections of cloth tied with grotesque and blood stained neatness by the automatic tie-der. But not even that was the worst.

"It tried to fix everything," he said to Jackson, tasting bile in his throat. "But a person isn't a sheet. Mark. What I saw... what was left of her..." Like Stanner, the hapless foreman, he could not finish. They took her out in a basket, he said softly.

Jackson whistled. "Who's going to get it in the neck? The laundry or the state inspectors?"

"Don't know yet," Huntin said. The mangler image still hung behind his eyes, the image of the mangler wheezing and thumping and hissing, blood dripping down the green sides of the long cabinet in runnels, the burning stink of her.

"It depends on who okayed that goddamn safety bar and under what circumstances."

"If it's the management, can they wiggle out of it?"

Huntin smiled without humour. "The woman died, Mark. If Gartley and Stanner were cutting corners on the speed ironer's maintenance, they'll go to jail. No matter who they know on the City Council."

"Do you think they were cutting corners?"

Huntin thought of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, badly lighted, floors wet and slippery, some of the machines incredibly ancient and creaking. "I think it's likely," he said quietly.

"They got up to go in the house together. Tell me how it comes out, Johnny," Jackson said. "I'm interested."

Huntin was wrong about the mangler. It was clean as a whistle.

Six state inspectors went over it before the inquest piece

by piece. The net result was absolutely nothing. The inquest verdict was death by misadventure.

Henton didn't hurriedly cornered Roger Martin, one of the inspectors, after the hearing. Martin was a tall drink of water with glasses as thick as the bottoms of shot glasses. He hogged with a ball-point pen under Henton's questions.

"Nothing? Absolutely nothing doing with the machine?"

"Nothing," Martin said. "Of course, the safety bar was the guts of the matter. It's in perfect working order. You heard the Mrs. Gillian testify. Mrs. Frawley must have pushed her hand too far. No one saw that they were watching their own work. She started screaming. Her hand was gone already, and the machine was taking her arm. They tried to pull her out instead of shutting it down — pure panic. Another woman, Mrs. Keene, said she did try to shut it off but it's a fair assumption that she hit the start button rather than the stop in the confusion. By then it was too late."

"Then the safety bar malfunctioned," Henton said flatly. "Unless she put her hand over it rather than under?"

"You can't. There's a stainless steel facing above the safety bar. And the bar itself didn't malfunction. It's connected into the machine itself. If the safety bar goes on, the bank, the machine shuts down."

"Then how did it happen, for Christ's sake?"

"We don't know. My colleagues and I are of the opinion that the only way the speed ramer could have killed Mrs. Frawley was for her to have fallen into it from above. And she had both feet in the floor when it happened. A dozen witnesses can testify to that."

"You're describing an impossible accident," Henton said.

"No. This one we don't understand." He paused, hesitated, and then said, "I will tell you one thing. Henton, since you seem to have taken this case to heart. If you went on to any one else, I deny I said it. But I didn't like that machine. It seemed — a most to be mocking us. I've inspected over a dozen speed ramers in the last five years in

gregorian basis. Some of them are in such bad shape that I wouldn't have a dog unleashed around them - the state law is lamentable. But they were only machines, of a sort. But this one - it's a spook. I don't know why, but this I think is the only one thing, even a technically, that was off whack. I would have arrested it shut down. Crazy, huh?

I felt the same way. Hunton said

Let me tell you about something that happened two years ago in Milton, the inspector said. He took off his glasses and began to polish them slowly on his vest. He had parked an old ice box out in his backyard. The woman who called us said her dog had been caught in it and suffocated. We got the state policeman in the area to interview him; it had to go to the town dump. See enough to feel sorry about the dog. He loaded it into his pickup and took it to the dump the next morning. That afternoon a woman in the neighbourhood reported her son missing.

God,' Hunton said.

The icebox was at the dump and the kid was in it, dead. A smart kind, according to the mother. She said he'd no more play in an empty icebox than he would take a ride with a strange man. Well, he did. We wrote it off. Case closed?

I guess, Hunton said.

No. The dump caretaker went out next day to take the door off the thing. City Ordinance No. 58 on the maintenance of public jumping places. Martin looked at him expressionlessly. He found six dead birds inside. Girls' sparrows, a robin. And he said the door closed on his arm while he was brushing them out. Gave him a hell of a jump. The manager at the Blue Ribbon strikes me like that. Hunton. I don't like it.

They looked at each other wordlessly in the empty inquest chamber, some six city blocks from where the Hadley Watson Model 6 Speed Ironer and the Jet Val in the box laundry steaming and tumbling over its sheets.

The case was driven out of his mind in the space of a week by the press of more pressing police work. It was only brought back when he and his wife dropped over to Mark Jackson's house for an evening of bid whist and beer.

Jackson greeted him with: "Have you ever wondered if that laundry machine you told me about is haunted, Johnny?"

Hunton blinked at a loss. What?

The speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry. I guess you didn't catch the squeak, this time.

What squeak? Hunton asked, interested.

Jackson passed him the evening paper and pointed to an item at the bottom of page two. The story said that a steam line had let go on the large speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, burning three of the six women working at the feeder end. The accident had occurred at 3:45 p.m. and was attributed to a rise in steam pressure from the laundry's boiler. One of the women, Mrs. Annette Gilian, had been held at City Receiving Hospital with second-degree burns.

Funny coincidence, he said, but the memory of Inspector Martin's words in the empty inquest chamber suddenly recurred. *It's a spook.* And the story about the dog and the boy and the birds caught in the discarded refrigerator.

He played cards very badly that night.

Mrs. Gilian was propped up in bed reading *Screen Secrets* when Hunton came into the four-bed hospital room. A large hospital blanket covered one arm and the side of her neck. The room's other occupant, a young woman with a pale face, was sleeping.

Mrs. Gilian blinked at the blue uniform and then smiled tentatively. If it was for Mrs. Chernikov, you'd have to come back later. They just gave her medication.

No, it's for you, Mrs. Gilian. Her smile faded a little. I'm here officially, which means I'm curious about the accident at the laundry, John Hunton. He held out his hand.

It was the right move. Mrs. Grant's smile became Mr. I.  
I. and she took his grip awkwardly with her own right  
hand. Anything I can tell you, Mr. Hutton. You I thought  
my Andy was nittable a schoolboy.

"What happened?"

We was running sheets and the ironer just flew up - and it  
seemed that was. I was thinking about going home an  
getting off my dogs when there's this great big bang like a  
bomb. Steam is everywhere and it's hissing no se-  
awhile. Her smile trembled on the verge of extinction. It  
was like the ironer was breathing. Like a dragon. It was  
Aru Alberta - that's Alberta Keene - shouted that some-  
thing was exploding and everyone was running and scream-  
ing and Garryn Jason started yelling she was hurt. I started  
to run away and I fell down. I didn't know I got it worst until  
then. God forbid it was no worse than it was. That live  
steam is three hundred degrees.

The paper said a steam line let go. What does that  
mean?"

The overhead pipe comes down, plus this kinda flexible  
one that feeds the machine. George - Mr. Stanner - said  
there must have been a surge from the boiler or something.  
The line split wide open.

Hanton could think of nothing else to ask. He was  
making ready to leave when she said reflectively,

We never used to have these things on the machine.  
Only lately. The steam line breaking. That awful awful  
accident with Mrs. Frawley. God rest her. And little things.  
Like the laundry got her dress caught in one of the drive  
chains. That could have been dangerous if she hadn't  
ripped it right out. Bolts and things fall off. Oh, Herb  
Diment - he's the laundry repairman - has had an awful  
time with it. Sheets get caught in the ladder. George says  
that's because they're using too much bleach in the  
washers but it never used to happen. Now the girls have to  
work on it. Jessie even says there are stillitch feet. Adele  
Frawley caught in it and it's sacrilege or something. I keep

had a curse. It's been that way ever since Sherry cut her hand on one of the clamps

Sherry?" Hunton asked

Sherry Ouellett. Pretty little thing, just out of high school. Good worker. But clumsy sometimes. You know how young girls are.

She cut her hand on something?

Nothing strange about that. There are clamps to tighten down the feeder belt, see. Sherry was adjusting them so we could do a heavier load and probably dreaming about some boy. She cut her finger and bled all over everything. Mrs Gulan looked puzzled. It wasn't until after that the bolts started falling off. Adelle was... you know... about a week later. As if the machine had tasted blood and found it liked it. Don't women get funny ideas sometimes. Officer Hunton?"

Hunton he said absent y, looking over her head and into space

Ironically he had met Mark Jackson in a washateria in the block that separated their houses, and it was there that the cop and the English professor still had their most interesting conversations.

Now they sat side by side in bland plastic chairs their clothes going round and round behind the glass portholes of the coin-op washers. Jackson's paperback copy of Milton's collected works lay neglected beside him while he listened to Hunton tell Mrs Gulan's story.

When Hunton had finished, Jackson said. 'I asked you once if you thought the mangle might be haunted. I was only half-joking. I ask you again now.'

No, Hunton said uneasily. Don't be stupid.

Jackson watched the turning clothes reflectively. 'Haunted is a bad word. Let's say possessed. There are almost as many spells for casting demons in as there are for casting them out. Frazier's *Golden Bough* is replete with

them. Druidic and Aztec sites contain others. Even older ones, back to Egypt. Almost all of them can be reduced to starting a common denominator. The most common, of course, is the blood of a virgin. He looked at Hunton. Mrs O'Farr said the trouble started after this Sherry Clouette accidentally cut herself.

'Oh, come on,' Hunton said.

'You have to admit she sounds just the type,' Jackson said.

'I ran right over to her house,' Hunton said with a small smile. 'I can see it. Miss Due due. I'm Officer John Hunton. I'm investigating an ironer with a bad case of demon possession and would like to know if you're a virgin. Do you think I'd get a chance to say goodbye to Sandra and the kids before they carted me off to the body hatch?'

'I'd be willing to bet you'd end up saying something just like that,' Jackson said without smiling. 'I'm serious, Johnny. That machine scares the hell out of me and I've never seen it.'

'For the sake of conversation,' Hunton said, 'what are some of the other so-called common denominators?'

Jackson shrugged. Hard to say without study. Most Anglo-Saxon hex formulas specify graveyard dirt or the eye of a toad. European spells often mention the hand of glory, which can be interpreted as the actual hand of a dead man or one of the hallucinogens used in connection with the Witches' Sabbath, usually belladonna or a psychotomimetic salve. There could be others.

'And you think all these things got into the Blue Ribbon ironer?' Christ. Mark 1. I bet there isn't any belladonna within a five hundred-mile radius. Or do you think someone whacked off their Uncle Fred's hand and dropped it in the folder?'

'It's seven hundred monkeys typed for seven hundred years.'

'One of them would turn out the works of Shakespeare.'

Hunton finished snarly. 'Go to hell. Your turn to go across to the drugstore and get some dimes for the dryers.'

It was very funny how George Stanner lost his arm in the mangle.

Seven o'clock Monday morning the laundry was deserted except for Stanner and Herb Diment, the maintenance man. They were performing the twice yearly function of greasing the mangle's bearings before the laundry's regular day began at seven-thirty. Diment was at the far end greasing the four secondaries and thinking of how unpleasant this machine made him feel lately when the mangle suddenly roared into life.

He had been holding up four of the canvas exhaust belts to get at the motor beneath and suddenly the belts were running in his hands, ripping the flesh off his palms, dragging him along.

He pulled free with a convulsive jerk seconds before the belts would have carried his hands into the mangle.

'What the Christ, George,' he yelled. 'Shut the frigging thing off.'

George Stanner began to scream.

It was a high, wailing, blood-maddened sound that filled the laundry, echoing off the steel faces of the washers, the grimacing mouths of the steam presses, the vacan' eyes of the industrial dryers. Stanner drew in a great, whooping gasp of air and screamed again. 'Oh God of Christ I'm caught! I'M CAUGHT!'

The rollers began to produce rising steam. The feeder gnashed and thumped. Bearings and motors seemed to cry out with a human life of their own.

Diment raced to the other end of the machine.

The first roller was already going a smoldered. Diment made a moaning, gobbling noise in his throat. The mangle howled and thumped and hissed.

A deaf observer might have thought at first that Stanner was merely bent over the machine at an odd angle. Then

even a deaf man would have seen the pale eye bulging veins of his face mouth twisted open in a continuous scream. The arm was disappearing under the safety bar and beneath the first roller the fabric of his shirt had torn away at the shoulder seam and his upper arm bulged grotesquely as the blood was pushed steadily backwards.

Turn it off! Stanner screamed. There was a snap as his elbow broke.

Diment thumbed the off button.

The mangle continued to hum and growl and turn.

Unbelieving, he slammed the button again and again nothing. The skin of Stanner's arm had grown shiny and taut. Soon I would split with the pressure the roll was putting on it, and still he was conscious and screaming. Diment had a nightmare cartoon image of a man flattened by a steamroller, leaving only a shadow.

Fuses! Stanner screamed. His head was being pulled down, down as he was dragged forward.

Diment whirled and ran to the boiler room. Stanner's screams chasing him like unalive ghosts. The mixed stench of blood and steam rose in the air.

On the left wall were three heavy grey boxes containing all the fuses for the laundry's electricity. Diment wrenched them open and began to pull the long cylindrical fuses like a crazy man, throwing them back over his shoulders. The overhead lights went out, then the air compressor, then the boiler itself, with a huge dying whine.

August 1, the mangle turned. Stanner's screams had been reduced to hobbles means.

Diment's eye happened on the big axe in its glassed-in box. He grabbed it with a small gasping whimper and ran back. Stanner's arm was gone almost to the shoulder. Within seconds his bent and straining neck would be snapped against the safety bar.

I can't! Diment babbled, holding the axe. Jesus. George. I can't! I can't!

The machine was an abattoir now. The ladder spat out

pieces of shirt sleeve scraps of flesh a finger Stanner gave a huge, whooping scream and Diment swung the axe up and brought it down in the laundry's shadowy lightlessness Twice Again

Stanner fell away unconscious and blue, blood jetting from the stump just below the shoulder The mangle sucked what was left into itself and shut down

Weeping Diment pulled his belt out of its loops and began to make a tourniquet.

Hunton was talking on the phone with Roger Martin the inspector Jackson watched him while he patiently rolled a ball back and forth for three-year-old Patty Hunton to chase

He pulled *all* the fuses?" Hunton was asking. "And the off button just didn't function, huh? Has the ironer been shut down?" Good Great huh? No, not official" Hunton frowned then looked sideways at Jackson. Are you still reminded of that refrigerator Roger?

Yes Me too Goodbye"

He hung up and looked at Jackson. "Let's go see the girl, Mark"

She had her own apartment (the hesitant yet proprietary way she showed them in after Hunton had flashed his buzzer made him suspect that she hadn't had it long) and she sat uncomfortably across from them in the carefully decorated postage stamp living room

I'm Officer Hunton and this is my associate, Mr Jackson. It's about the accident at the laundry" He felt hugely uncomfortable with this dark, shyly pretty girl

"Awful, Sherry Ouellette murmured. It's the only place I've ever worked. Mr Gartley is my uncle. I liked it because it let me have this place and my own friends. But now it's so *spooky*"

"The State Board of Safety has shut the ironer down

pending a full investigation. Hanton said. Did you know that?"

"Sure. She sighed restlessly. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Miss Charlotte Jackson interrupted. You had an accident with the mangle, didn't you? Cut your hand on a clamp I believe?"

"Yes. I cut my finger. Suddenly her face clouded. That was the first thing. She looked at them woefully. 'Some times I feel like the girls don't like me so much any more...as if I were to blame.'

"I have to ask you a hard question. Jackson said slowly. A question you now must take. It seems absolutely personal and off the subject, but I can only tell you this is not. Your answers won't ever be marked down in a file or record."

She looked frightened. "Did I do something?"

Jackson smiled and shook his head. "She met too. Thank God for Mark. Hanton thought."

I said this through the answer may help you keep your nice little flat here, get your job back, and make things at the laundry the way they were before."

"I'd answer anything to have that," she said.

"Sherry, are you a virgin?"

She looked utterly flabbergasted, utterly shocked, as if a priest had given communion and then slapped her. Then she lifted her head, made a gesture at her neat efficiency apartment, as if asking them how they could believe it might be a place of assignation.

"I'm saying myself to my husband," she said simply.

Hanton and Jackson looked calmly at each other, and in that tick of a second, Hanton knew that it was all true: a devil had taken over the inanimate steel and cogs and gears of the mangle and had turned it into something with its own life.

"Thank you," Jackson said quietly.

'What now?' Hunton asked bleakly as they rode back. 'Find a priest to exorcise it?'

Jackson snorted. 'You'd go a far piece to find one that wouldn't hand you a few tracts to read while he phoned the booby hatch. It has to be our play, Johnny.'

'Can we do it?'

'Maybe. The problem is this. We know something is in the mangler. We don't know what.' Hunton felt cold, as if touched by a fleshless finger. 'There are a great many demons. Is the one we're dealing with in the circle of Bubastis or Pan? Baal? Or the Christian deity we call Satan? We don't know. If the demon had been deliberately cast, we would have a better chance. But this seems to be a case of random possession.'

Jackson ran his fingers through his hair. 'The blood of a virgin? Yes. But that narrows it down hardly at all. We have to be sure, very sure.'

'Why?' Hunton asked bluntly. 'Why not just get a bunch of exorcism formulas together and try them out?'

Jackson's face went cold. 'This isn't cops n' robbers, Johnny. For Christ's sake, don't think it is. The rite of exorcism is horribly dangerous. It's like controlled nuclear fission, in a way. We could make a mistake and destroy ourselves. The demon is caught in that piece of machinery. But give it a chance and—'

'It could get out?'

'It would love to get out,' Jackson said grimly. 'And it likes to kill.'

When Jackson came over the following evening, Hunton had sent his wife and daughter to a movie. They had the living room to themselves, and for this Hunton was relieved. He could still barely believe what he had become involved in.

'I canceled my classes,' Jackson said, and spent the day with some of the most god-awful books you can imagine.'

This afternoon I fed over thirty recipes for calling demons into the tech computer. I've got a number of common elements. Surprisingly few.

He showed Hunton the list: blood of a virgin, graveyard dirt, hand of glory, bat's blood, night moss, horse's hoof, eye of toad.

There were others, all marked secondary.

Horse's hoof. Hunton said thoughtfully. Funny.

'Very common. In fact—'

'Could these things — any of them — be interpreted loosely?' Hunton interrupted.

'Icimens picked at night could be substituted for night moss, for instance?'

'Yes.'

'It's very likely,' Jackson said. 'Magical formulas are often ambiguous and elastic. The black arts have always allowed plenty of room for creativity.'

'Substitute Jell-O for horse's hoof,' Hunton said. 'Very popular in bag lunches. I noticed a little container of it sitting under the ironer's sheet platform on the day the Frawley woman died. Gelatine is made from horses' hooves.'

Jackson nodded. 'Anything else?'

'Bat's blood — well, it's a big place. Lots of unlighted nooks and crannies. Bats seem likely, although I doubt if the management would admit to it. One could conceivably have been trapped in the manger.'

Jackson tipped his head back and knuckled bloodshot eyes. 'It fits . . . it all fits.'

'It does?'

'Yes. We can safely rule out the hand of glory. I think. Certainly no one dropped a hand into the ironer before Mrs Frawley's death — and Beladonna is definitely not indigenous to the area.'

'Graveyard dirt?'

'What do you think?'

'It would have to be a hell of a coincidence,' Hunton said.

Nearest cemetery is Pleasant Hill, and that's five miles from the Blue Ribbon.

Okay Jackson said. I got the computer operator who thought I was getting ready for Halloween - to run a positive breakdown of all the primary and secondary elements on the list. Every possible combination I threw out some two dozen which were completely meaningless. The others fall into fairly clear-cut categories. The elements we've isolated are in one of those

'What is it?'

Jackson grinned. An easy one. The mythos centres in South America with branches in the Caribbean. Related to voodoo. The literature I've got looks on the deities as strictly bush league compared to some of the real heavies, like Sabbath or He Who-Cannot-Be-Named. The thing in that machine is going to sink away like the neighbour's jod-billy.'

'How do we do it?'

Holy water and a smidgen of the Holy Eucharist ought to do it. And we can read some of the Leviticus to it. Strictly Christian white magic.

'You're sure it's not worse?'

'Don't see how it can be.' Jackson said pensively. I don't mind telling you I was worried about that hand of glory. That's very black stuff. Strong magic.'

'Holy water wouldn't stop it?'

A demon called up in conjunction with the hand of glory could eat a stack of Bibles for breakfast. We would be in bad trouble messing with something like that at all. Better to pull the goddamn thing apart.

'Well, are you completely sure?'

'No, but fairly sure. It all fits too well.'

'When?'

'The sooner the better.' Jackson said. 'How do we get in? Break a window?'

Henton smled, reached into his pocket, and dangled a key in front of Jackson's nose.

Where'd you get that? Cartles?"

No, Hunton said. "From a state inspector named Martin."

He knows what we're doing!"

I think he suspects. He told me a funny story a couple of weeks ago."

About the mangier?"

No, Hunton said. "About a refrigerator. Come on.

Adele Fawles was dead, sewed together by a patient undertaker, she lay in her coffin. Yet something of her spirit perhaps remained in the machine, and it did indeed speak out. She would have known could have warned them. She had been prone to indigestion, and for this common ailment she had taken a common stomach tablet called E-Z Gel, purchasable over the counter of any drugstore for seventy-nine cents. The side panel holds a printed warning: People with glaucoma must not take E-Z Gel, because the active ingredient causes an aggravation of that condition. Unfortunately, Adele Fawles did not have that condition. She might have remembered the day, shortly before Sherry the cat cut her hand, that she had dropped a full box of E-Z Gel tablets into the mangier by accident. But she was dead, unaware that the active ingredient which soothed her heartburn was a chemical derivative of the laudanum known quaintly in some European countries as the hand of glory.

There was a sudden ghastly burping noise in the spectral silence of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, a bat fluttered madly into its hole in the insulation above the laundry where it had crawled, wrapping wings around its hideous face.

I was a noise almost like a chuckle.

The mangier began to run with a sudden lurching grind, bats burping through the darkness, toes meeting and meshing along, big heavy paws, ergs, ten rotating in and on.

It was ready for them.

When Hunton pulled into the parking lot it was shortly after midnight and the moon was hidden behind a raft of moving clouds. He jammed on the brakes and switched off the lights in the same motion, Jackson's forehead almost slammed against the padded dash.

He switched off the ignition and the steady thump-hiss-thump became louder. "It's the mangler," he said slowly. "It's the mangler. Running by itself. In the middle of the night."

They sat for a moment in silence, feeling the fear crawl up their legs.

Hunton said, "All right. Let's do it."

They got out and walked to the building, the sound of the mangler growing louder. As Hunton put the key into the lock of the service door, he thought that the machine did sound alive, as if it were breathing in great hot gasps and speaking to itself in hissing, sardonic whispers.

"All of a sudden I'm glad I'm with a cop," Jackson said. He shifted the brown bag he held from one arm to the other. Inside was a small jelly jar filled with holy water, wrapped in waxed paper, and a Gideon Bible.

They stepped inside and Hunton snapped up the light switches by the door. The fluorescents flickered into cold light. At the same instant the mangler shut off.

A membrane of steam hung over its rollers. It waited for them in its new ominous silence.

"God, it's an ugly thing," Jackson whispered.

"Come on," Hunton said. "Before we lose our nerve."

They walked over to it. The safety bar was in its down position over the belt which fed the machine.

Hunton put out a hand. "Close enough, Mark. Give me the stuff and tell me what to do."

"But—"

"No argument."

Jackson handed him the bag and Hunton put it on the sheet table in front of the machine. He gave Jackson the Bible.

I'm going to read Jackson said. When I point at you  
sprinkle the holy water on the machine with your fingers  
You say in the name of the Father and of the Son and of  
the Holy Ghost get thee from this place thou unclean One  
It?

'Yes.'

The second time I point, break the wafer and repeat the  
incantation again.

How will we know if it's working?

You'll know. The thing is apt to break every window in  
the place get ting out if it doesn't work the first time we  
keep doing it until it does.

I'm scared green. Hunt on said.

As a matter of fact so am I.

If we're wrong about the kind of glory

We're not Jackson said. Here we go.

He began. His voice filled the empty bladders with spe-  
cial echoes. Turnest not though aside th' ideas nor make  
molding gods for yourself. I am the Lord thy God. The  
words fell like stones into a silence that had suddenly  
become thick with a creeping temblor like a . The monger  
remained still and silent under the fluorescents and to  
Hunt on it still seemed urgent.

and the land will vomit you out for having defrauded  
as I've defrauded nations before you. Jackson looked up  
his face screwed and pointed.

Hunt on sprinkled holy water across the feeder belt.

There was a sudden gnashing scream of the raged metal  
Smoke rose from the canvas belts where the holy water had  
touched and took on writhing red tinged shapes. The  
monger shuddered jerked in a spasm.

We've got it Jackson cried above the single amboar. It's  
on the run!

He began to read again his voice rising over the sound of  
the machinery. He pointed to Hunt on again and Hunt on  
sprinkled some of the dust. As he did so he was suddenly  
swept with a bone freezing terror. A sudden cold freezing

that it has gone wrong, that the machine had called their bluff, and was the stronger.

Jackson's voice was still rising, approaching climax.

Sparks began to jump across the arc between the main motor and the secondary. The smell of ozone filled the air like the copper smell of hot blood. Now the main motor was smoking, the mangler was running at an insane, blurred speed. A finger touched to the central belt would have caused the whole body to be hauled in and turned to a bloody rag in the space of five seconds. The concrete beneath their feet trembled and thrummed.

A main heating blow with a searing flash of purple light filling the chill air with the smell of thunderstorms, and still the mangler ran, faster and faster, belts and rollers and dogs moving at a speed that made them seem to blend and merge, change, melt, transmute.

Hanton, who had been standing almost hypnotized, suddenly took a step backwards. 'Get away!' he screamed over the blaring racket.

'We've almost got it!' Jackson veered back. Why?

There was a sudden, indescribable ripping noise and a fissure in the concrete floor suddenly raced towards them and past, widening. Chips of ancient cement flew up in a starburst.

Jackson knocked at the mangler and screamed.

It was trying to pull itself out of the concrete, like a dinosaur trying to escape a tar pit. And it wasn't precisely an ironer any more. It was still changing, melting. The 550-volt cable fell, spitting blue fire into the rollers and was chewed away. For a moment two eyeballs glared at them like lambent eyes, eyes filled with a great and cold hunger.

At her fault, the gate open. The mangler leaned towards them, within an ace of being free of the concrete moorings that held it. It leered at them, the safety bar had slammed up and what Hanton saw was a gaping, hungry mouth filled with steam.

They turned to run and another fissure opened at their feet. Behind them a great screaming roar as the thing came free. Huntin leaped over, but Jackson stumbled and fell sprawling.

Hunton turned to help and a huge amorphous shadow fell over him blocking the fluorescents.

It stood over Jackson who lay on his back staring up in silent rictus of terror - the perfect sacrifice. Huntin had only a confused impression of something black and moving that bulked to a tremendous height above them both something with glaring electric eyes the size of toothhalls, an open mouth with a moving canvas tongue.

He ran. Jackson's dying scream followed him.

When Roger Martin finally got out of bed to answer the doorbell he was still only a third awake but when Hunton reeled in shock slapped him fully into the world with a rough hand.

Hunton's eyes bulged madly from his head and his hands were claws as he scratched at the front of Martin's robe. There was a small gouging cut on his cheek and his face was splashed with dirty grey specks of powdered cement.

His hair had gone dead white.

Help me - for Jesus' sake help me. Mark is dead. Jackson is dead.

Sit down, Martin said. Come in the living room.

Hunton followed him making a thick whining noise in this throat, like a dog.

Martin poured him a two-ounce knock of Jim Beam and Hunton held the glass in both hands downing the raw liquor in a choked gulp. The glass fell unheeded to the carpet and his hands like wandering ghosts sought Martin's lap again.

'The mangler killed Mark Jackson. It - it - oh God it might get out! We can't let it get out. We can't - we - oh -' He began to scream a crazy, whooping sound his voice and fell in jagged convulsions.

Martin tried to hand him another drink but Huntin knocked it aside. 'We have to burn it,' he said. 'Burn it before I can get out. Oh, what if it gets out? Oh Jesus, what if...' His eyes suddenly flickered glazed, rolled up to show the whites, and he fell to the carpet in a stone-like faint.

Mrs Martin was in the doorway clutching her robe to her throat. 'Who is he? Rog? Is he crazy? I thought...' She shuddered.

'I don't think he's crazy.' She was suddenly frightened by the sick shadow of fear on her husband's face. 'God, I hope he came quick enough.'

He turned to the telephone, picked up the receiver, froze.

There was a faint, swishing noise from the east of the house, the way that Hunter had come. A steady grinding, after growing louder. The living-room window stood half open and now Martin caught a dark smell on the breeze. An odour of ozone... or blood.

He stood with his hand on the useless telephone as it grew louder, louder, gnashing and tumbling, something in the streets that was hot and steaming. The blood stench filled the room.

His hand dropped from the telephone.  
It was already out.

## THE BOOGEYMAN

I came to you because I want to tell my story—the man on Dr. Harper's couch was saying. The man was Lester Bulings from Waterbury, Connecticut. According to the history taken from Nurse Vickers, he was twenty-eight, employed by an industrial firm in New York, divorced, and the father of three children. All deceased.

I can't go to a priest because I'm not a Catholic. I can't go to a lawyer because I haven't done anything to consult a lawyer about. All I did was kill my kids. One at a time. Killed them all.'

Dr. Harper turned on the tape recorder.

Bulings lay straight as a yardstick on the couch, not giving it an inch of himself. His feet protruded stiffly over the end. Picture of a man enduring necessary humiliation. His hands were folded corpse-like on his chest. His face was carefully set. He looked at the plain white composition ceiling as if seeing scenes and pictures played out there.

Or you mean you actually killed them?

No. Impatient flick of the hand. But I was responsible. Dennis in 1967. Shirley in '71. And Andy this year. I want to tell you about it.

Dr. Harper said nothing. He thought that Bulings looked haggard and old. His hair was thinning, his complexion sallow. His eyes held all the miserable secrets of whisky.

They were murdered, see? Only no one believes that. If they would, things would be all right.

Why is that?

Because . . .

Bulings broke off and darted up on his elbows, staring across the room. "What's that?" he barked. His eyes had narrowed to black slots.

"What's what?"

"That door."

"The closet," Dr. Harper said. "Where I hang my coat and leave my overshoes."

"Open it. I want to see."

Dr. Harper got up wordlessly, crossed the room, and opened the closet. Inside a tan raincoat hung on one of four or five hangers. Beneath that was a pair of shiny gooseshoes. *The New York Times* had been carefully tucked into one of them. That was all.

"All right," Dr. Harper said.

"All right." Bulings removed the props of his elbows and returned to his previous position.

"You were saving," Dr. Harper said as he went back to his chair, "that if the murder of your three children could be proved, all your troubles would be over. Why is that?"

"I'd go to jail," Bulings said immediately. "For life. And you can see into all the rooms in a jail. All the rooms." He smiled at nothing.

"How were your children murdered?"

"Don't try to jerk it out of me!"

Bulings twisted around and stared balefully at Harper.

"I told you, don't worry. I'm not one of your freaks strutting around and pretending to be Napoleon or explaining that I got hooked on heroin because my mother didn't love me. I know you won't believe me. I don't care. It doesn't matter. Just to tell will be enough."

"All right," Dr. Harper got out his pipe.

"I married Rita in '965. I was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was pregnant. That was Denoy. His lips twisted in a rubbery, frightening grin that was gone in a week. I had to leave college and get a job, but I didn't mind. I loved both of them. We were very happy."

Rita got pregnant just a little while after Perry was born, and Sharl came along in December of 1966. Andy came in the summer of 1967, and Henry was already dead by then. Andy was an accident. That's what Rita said. She said sometimes that birth control stuff doesn't work. I think that it was more than an accident. Children be a man down, you know. Women like that, especially when the man is brighter than her. Don't you find that's true?

Harper grunted non-committally.

It doesn't matter though. I loved him anyway. He said it almost vengefully, as if he had loved the child despite his wife.

Who killed the children? Harper asked.

The bungeman. Lester Barnes answered immediately. The bungeman killed them all. Just came out of the closet and killed them. He twisted around and grinned. You think I'm crazy, all right. It's written all over me. But I don't care. All I want to do is tell you and then get out.

I'm listening, Harper said.

It started when Henry was a most two and Sharl was just an infant. He started crying when Rita put him to bed. We had a two bed room place, see. Sharl slept in a corner in my room. At first I thought he was crying because he didn't have a bottle to take to bed anymore. Rita said I don't make an issue of it, let. I go let him have it and he'd drop it in his own. But that's the way kids start. I had. You get permissive with them, spoil them. Then they break your heart. Get some girl knocked up, you know, or start shooting dope. Or they get to be sissies. Can you imagine walking up some morning and finding your kid—your son—is a sissy?

After a while though, when he didn't stop, I started putting him to bed myself. And if he didn't stop crying I'd give him a whack. Then Rita said the way saying—right over and over again. Well, I didn't know kids that's all, how can you tell what they're saying. On some he can tell.

Rita wanted to put in a night light. One of those with

play things with Mickey Mouse or Huckleberry Hound or something on. I wouldn't let her. If a kid doesn't get over being afraid of the dark when he's little, he never gets over it.

Anyway, he died the summer after Shir was born. I put him to bed that night and he started to cry right off. I heard what he said that time. He pointed right at the closet when he said it. "Boogeyman," the kid says. "Boogeyman, Daddy!"

I turned off the light and went into our room and asked Rita why she wanted to teach the kid a word like that. I was tempted to slap her around a little, but I didn't. She said she never taught him to say that. I called her a goddamn liar.

That was a bad summer for me, see. The only job I could get was loading Pepsi-Cola trucks in a warehouse, and I was tired all the time. Shir would wake up and cry every night and Rita would pick her up and snuffle. I tell you, some times I felt like throwing them both out a window. Christ, kids drive you crazy sometimes. You could kill them.

Well, the kid woke me at three in the morning, right on schedule. I went to the bathroom, only a quarter awake, you know, and Rita asked me if I'd check on Denny. I tried her to do it herself and went back to bed. I was almost asleep when she started to scream.

I got up and went in. The kid was dead on his back. Just as white as flour except for where the blood had — had sunk. Black at the legs, the head, the arse, the buttocks. His eyes were open. That was the worst, you know. Wide open and glassy. Like the eyes you see on a moosehead some guy put over his mantle. Like pictures you see of those gook kids over in Nam. But an American kid shouldn't look like that. Dead on his back. Wearing diapers and rubber pants because he'd been wetting himself again the last couple of weeks. Awful. I cried that kid.

Bengs shook his head slowly, then offered the rubbery, frightening grin again. Rita was screaming her head off.

She tried to pick Denny up and rock him, but I wouldn't let her. The cops don't like you to touch any of the evidence. I know that —'

Did you know it was the hangerman then?" Harper asked quietly.

"Oh, no. Not then. But I did see one thing. It didn't mean anything to me then, but my mind stored it away."

What was that?"

"The closet door was open. Not much. Just a crack. But I knew I left it shut. See. There's dry-cleaning bags in there. A kid messes around with one of those and bango. Asphyxiation. You know that?"

"Yes. What happened then?"

Billings shrugged. "We planted him." He looked morbidly at his hands, which had thrown dirt on three tiny coffins.

Was there an inquest?

Sure. Billings's eyes flashed with sardonic brilliance. Some back-country fuckhead with a stethoscope and a black bag full of Junior Mints and a sheepskin from some cow college. "Crib death," he called it. "You ever hear such a pile of yellow manure? The kid was three years old."

"Crib death is most common during the first year," Harper said carefully, but that diagnosis has gone on death certificates for children up to age five for want of a better —'

*Bullock!*" Billings spat out violently.

Harper relit his pipe.

We moved Shirl into Denny's old room a month after the funeral. Rita fought it tooth and nail, but I had the last word. It hurt me, of course it did. Jesus. I loved having the kid in with us. But you can't get overprotective. You make a kid a cripple that way. When I was a kid my mom used to take me to the beach and then scream herself hoarse.

Don't go out so far. Don't go there. It's got an undertow! You only ate an hour ago. Don't go over your head. Even to watch out for sharks, be ore God. So what happens?" I

can I even go near the water now. It's the truth. I get the cramps if I go near a beach. Rita got me to take her and the kids to Savin Rock once when Denny was alive. I got sick as a dog. I know, see? You can't overprotect kids. And you can't cuddle yourself either. Life goes on. Shirl went right into Denny's crib. We sent the old mattress to the dump though. I didn't want my girl to get any germs.

So a year goes by. And one night when I'm putting Shirl into her crib she starts to yowl and scream and cry. Boogeyman. Daddy boogeyman boogeyman.

That threw a jump into me. It was just like Denny. And I started to remember about that closet door open just a crack when we found him. I wanted to take her into our room for the night.

Did you?

No. Billings regarded his hands and his face twitched. How could I go to Rita and admit I was wrong? I had to be strong. She was always such a jellyfish. Look how easy she went to bed with me when we weren't married.

Harper said. On the other hand, look how easily you went to bed with her?

Billings froze in the act of rearranging his hands and slowly turned his head to look at Harper. Are you trying to be a wise guy?

'No, indeed,' Harper said.

Then let me tell it my way. Billings snapped. I came here to get this off my chest. To tell my story. I'm not going to talk about my sex life if that's what you expect. Rita and I had a very normal sex life with none of that dirty stuff. I know it gives some people a charge to talk about that but I'm not one of them.

Okay, Harper said.

Okay. Billings echoed with uneasy arrogance. He seemed to have lost the thread of his thought and his eyes wandered uneasily to the closet door, which was firmly shut.

Would you like that open? Harper asked.

"No" Billings said quickly. He gave a nervous little laugh.  
What do I want to look at your overshoes for?"

The boogeyman got her too Billings said. He brushed at his forehead as if sketching memories. A month later But something happened before that I heard a noise in there one night. And then she screamed. I opened the door real quick - the hall light was on and she was sitting up in the crib crying and something moved. Back in the shadows by the closet. Something scuttled.

Was the closet door open?"

A little. Just a crack. Billings licked his lips. Shirl was screaming about the boogeyman. And something else that sounded like 'claws'. Only she said "craws", you know. Little kids have trouble with that 'l' sound. Rita ran upstairs and asked what the matter was. I said she got scared by the shadows of the branches moving on the ceiling.'

"Crawset?" Harper said.

"Huh?"

"Crawset closet. Maybe she was trying to say 'closet'."

"Maybe," Billings said. "Maybe that was it. But I don't think so. I think it was 'claws'." His eyes began seeking the closet door again. "Claws, long claws." His voice had sunk to a whisper.

Did you look in the closet?"

"Y-yes" Billings's hands were laced tightly across his chest, laced tightly enough to show a white moon at each knuckle.

"Was there anything in there? Did you see .he

"I didn't see anything" Billings screamed suddenly. And the words poured out as if a black cork had been pulled from the bottom of his soul. When she died I found her see. And she was black. ALL black. She swallowed her own tongue and she was just as black as a nigger in a minstrel show and she was staring at me. Her eyes they looked like those eyes you see on stuffed animals all slitty and awful,

like live marbles and they were saying it got me. Daddys you let it get me you k'ed me you helped it kill me His words trailed off. One single tear very large and silent ran down the side of his cheek.

It was a brain convulsion see? kids get those sometimes. A bad signa from the brain. They had an autopsy at Hartford Receiving and they told us she choked on her tongue from the convulsion. And I had to go home alone because they kept Rita under sedation. She was out of her mind. I had to go back to that house all alone and I know a kid don't just get convulsions because their brain frigged up. You can scare a kid into convulsions. And I had to go back to the house where it was.

He whispered. I slept on the couch. With the light on.'

Did anything happen?

I had a dream. Billings said. I was in a dark room and there was something I couldn't quite see in the corner. It made a noise - a squishy noise. It reminded me of a comic book I read when I was a kid. *Tales from the Crypt* you remember that? Christ. They had a guy named Gut them fingers he could draw everything awful thing in the world - and some out of it. Anyway in this story this woman drowned her husband see? Put cement blocks on his feet and dropped him into a quarry. Only he came back. He was all rotted and black green and the fish had eaten away one of his eyes and there was seaweed in his hair. He came back and killed her. And when I woke up in the middle of the night I thought that would be leaning over me. With claws - long claws.

Dr Harper looked at the big black clock inset into his desk. Lester Billings had been speaking for nearly half an hour. He said. When you wife came back home what was her attitude towards you?

She still loved me. Billings said with pride. She still wanted to know what I told her. That's the wife's place right? This woman's job only makes sick people. The most import-

But being pregnant is a person to know his place. It's his place.

'Station update?'

That's Mr. B —'s snappy hissing. This is exactly Anna's wish. To know her husband. Oh, she was worried enough the first four or five months after — dragged around the house, didn't sing, didn't watch the TV, didn't cook, knew she'd go crazy. When they re-thought it, she didn't go, so she watched other them. After a while, she gave up to the hotel and stayed and took a nap, and she didn't remember her dreams what they looked like.

'She worked up other babs,' he said darkly. 'I told her it was a bad idea. Oh, not I, yet, but for a while. I told her it was at me to just get love things and begin to enjoy each other. We never had a chance to do that before. If you wanted a girl to a movie, you had to hassle around for a baby-sitter. You could try going into town to see the Miss America, but her folks would take the kids, because my mom would not have anything to do with us. Henry was born too soon after we were married, see.' She said it so was just a blimp, a common nose-corner-walker. Corner-walker is what my mom always called them. Isn't that a sketch? She sat me down once and told me diseases you can get if you went to a doctor. 'In a prostitute. How your pt — your penis has just a little tiny sore in one day and the next day it's rotting right off. She would not even come to the wedding.'

B —'s drummed his chest with his fingers.

'It's a gynaecologist told her, in his office, he called an H. D. inter-uterine device. He printed the doctor said. He just sticks it up the woman's — her place, and that's it. If there's anything in there — the egg can't fertilise. You don't even know it's there. He spoke at the evening with dark sweetness. No one knows — is there one? Anna, next year she's pregnant again. Some too good.'

'So her husband, me, had a perfect. Harper said. The pregnancy rate is eighty-eight percent. The H. D. may be a good

by cramps, strong menstrual flow, and in exceptional cases by evacuation.

Yeah. Or you can take it out.

That's possible.<sup>1</sup>

So what's next? She's knitting little things, singing in the shower, and eating pickles like crazy. Sitting on my lap and saying things about how it must have been Groucho Marx.

The baby came at the end of the year after Shirley's death?

That's right. A boy. She named it Andrew Lester Hulings. I didn't want anything to do with it, at least at first. My motto was she screwed up, so let her take care of it. I know how that sounds but you have to remember that I'd been through a lot.

But I warmed up to him, you know? He was the only one of the litter that looked like me. For one thing, Dennis looked like his mother, and Shirley didn't look like anybody except maybe my Grammys Ann. But Andy was the spitting image of me.

I'd get home from work and he'd be in his playpen when I got home from work. He'd grab only my finger and smile and giggle. Nine weeks old and the kid was grinning up at his dad. You believe that?

Then one night here I am coming out of a drugstore with a mobile to hang over the kid's crib. Me? Kids don't appreciate presents until they're old enough to say thank you, that was always my motto. But there I was, buying him silly crap and at once I realize I love him the most that I had and her job by then, a pretty good one, selling drugs for Cohen and Sons. I did real well, and when Andy was one we moved to Waterbury. The old place had too many bad memories.

And too many weeds.

That next year was the best one for us. I'd give every finger on my right hand I shave back again. Oh, the war in Vietnam was still going on, and the hippies were still running around with no clothes on, and the niggers were yelling a lot, but none of that touched us. We were on a

quiet street with nice neighbors. We were happy, he summed up simply. I asked Rita once if she wasn't worried. You know, bad luck comes in threes and all that. She said nothing to us. She said Andy was special. She said God had drawn a ring around him.

Bengs looked morbidly at the ceiling.

Last year wasn't so good. Something about the house change. I started keeping my boots in the hall because I didn't like to open the closet door any more. I kept thinking. Well, what it is in there. A crunched down and ready to spring the second I open the door. And I started thinking I could hear swishy noises, as if something black and green and wet was moving around in there just a little.

Rita asked me if I was working too hard and I started to snap at her, just like the old days. I got sick to my stomach leaving them alone to go to work, but I was glad to get out. God help me. I was glad to get out. I started to think, see that I took us far afield when we moved. It had to hunt around, seeking through the streets at night and maybe creeping in the sewers. Since vagabonds. It had to wait hours as I shacked. I wanted Andy and I wanted me. I started to think, maybe I was thinking of a thing long enough and believe in it. I got sick. Maybe all the thimbles we were scared of when we were kids. Frankenstin and Worman and Mummy. Maybe they were real. Real enough like the Andy that were supposed to have been strong and to be drowned in water if we'd just never found. Maybe.

Are you back by away from something? Mr. Bengs.

Bengs was silent for a long time. Two minutes or less. At the beginning of which I then he said, about us. Andy. I could hardly. Rita wasn't there. She got sick from her father. Her mother had been in a car crash the day after New Year and wasn't expected to live. She took a bus back last night.

Her mother didn't die, but she was on the critical list for a long time. Two months. I had a very good woman who

stayed with Andy days. We kept house nights. And closet doors kept coming open.

Bilings licked his lips. The kid was sleeping in the room with me. It's funny too. Rita asked me once when he was two if I wanted to move him into another room. Spock or one of those other quacks c arms it's bad for kids to sleep with their parents, see? Supposed to give them traumas about sex and all that. But we never did it unless the kid was asleep. And I didn't want to move him. I was afraid to. after Denny and Shirley.

But you did move him, didn't you? Dr Harper asked.

Yeah, Bilings said. He showed a sick, yellow smile. I did.

Silence again. Bilings wrestled with it.

I had to, he barked finally. I had to. It was all right when Rita was there, but when she was gone, it started to get hold of me. It started... He rolled his eyes at Harper and bared his teeth in a savage grin. Oh, you won't be eve at. I know what you think, just another goofy for your case-book. I know that, but you weren't there. You busy smug head-peeper.

One night every other, in the house blew wide open. One morning I go up and found a trail of mud and filth across the hall between the coal closet and the front door. Was I going out? Coming in? I don't know. Before Jesus, I just don't know! Records all scratched up and covered with slime, mirrors broken, and the sounds... the sounds... ?

He ran a hand through his hair. You'd wake up at three in the morning and look into the dark and at first you'd say,

It's only the clock. But underneath it you could hear some being moving in a stealthy way. But not too stealthy because it wanted you to hear it. A scrapping sound like something from the kitchen drain. Or a clicking sound like claws being dragged lightly over the staircase carpet. And you'd close your eyes, knowing that hearing it was bad, but if you saw it,

And always you'd be afraid that the horses might stop for a little while and then there would be a laugh right over your face and breath of air like stale cabbage on your face and then hands on your throat.

Bilings was pale and trembling.

So I moved him. I knew it would go for him to see because he was weaker. And it did. That very first night he screamed in the middle of the night and finally when I got up the two ones to go in, he was standing up in bed and screaming. The bogeyman. Daddy. bogeyman wanna go with Daddy go with Daddy. Billings's voice had become a high trill like a child's. His eyes seemed to fill his entire face. He almost seemed to shrink on the couch.

But I couldn't. The child-shattering treble continued. I couldn't. And an hour later, here was a scream. An awful gurgling scream. And I knew how much I loved him because I ran in. I didn't even turn on the light. I ran ran ran oh Jesus God Mary it had him. It was shaking him, shaking him, just like a terrier shakes a piece of cloth and I could see something with awful slumped shoulders and a scarecrow head and I could smell something like a dead mouse in a pop bottle and I heard. He trailed off, and then his voice cracked back into an adult fatigued. I heard it when Andy's neck broke. Billings's voice was cold and dead. It made a sound like ice cracking when you're skating on a country pond in winter.

Then what happened?

Oh I ran. Bilings said in the same cool dead voice. I went to an all-night diner. Now's that for complete cowardice? Ran to an all-night diner and drank six cups of coffee. Then I went home. It was a ready dawn. I called the police even before I went upstairs. He was lying on the floor and staring at me. Accusing me. A tiny bit of blood had run out of his ear. Only a drop really. And the close door was open—but just a crack.

The voice stopped. Harper looked at the big taxicock.  
Fifty minutes had passed.

'Make an appointment with the nurse,' he said. 'In fact several of them Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

I only came to tell my story, Billings said. 'To get it off my chest. I lied to the police, see? Told them the kid must have tried to get out of his crib in the night and . . . they swallowed it. Course they did. That's just what it looked like. Accidental, like the others. But Rita knew Rita finally . . . knew . . .'

He covered his eyes with his right arm and began to weep.

Mr Billings there is a great deal to talk about, Dr Harper said after a pause. 'I believe we can remove some of the guilt you've been carrying, but first you have to want to get rid of it.'

'Don't you believe I do?' Billings cried, removing his arm from his eyes. They were red, raw, wounded.

Not yet, Harper said quietly. 'Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

After a long silence, Billings muttered. Goddamn shrink. All right. All right.

Make an appointment with the nurse. Mr Billings. And have a good day.'

Billings laughed emptily and walked out of the office quickly without looking back.

The nurse's station was empty. A small sign on the desk doctor said. Back in a minute.

Billings turned and went back into the office. Doctor, your nurse is . . .

The room was empty.

But the closet door was open. Just a crack.

'So nice,' the voice from the closet said. 'So nice.' The words sounded as if they might have come through a mouthful of rotted seaweed.

Billings stood rooted to the spot as the closet door swung open. He dimly felt warmth at his crotch as he wet himself.

'So nice' the boogeyman said as it shambled out  
It still held its Dr Harper mask in one rotted spade-claw  
hand

## GREY MATTER

They had been predicting a norther all week and along about Thursday we got it, a real screamer that piled up eight inches by four in the afternoon and showed no signs of slowing down. The usual five or six were gathered around the Reliance in Henry's Nie-Owl, which is the only little store on this side of Bangor that stays open right around the clock.

Henry don't do a huge business - mostly it amounts to selling the college kids their beer and wine - but he gets by and it's a place for us old duffers on Social Security to get together and talk about who's died lately and how the world's going to hell.

This afternoon Henry was at the counter. Bill Pelham, Bertie Connors, Carl Littlefield and me was huddled up by the stove. Outside not a car was moving on Ohio Street and the ploughs was having hard going. The wind was socking drifts across that looked like the backbone on a dinosaur.

Henry only had three customers all afternoon - that is if you want to count in himself Eddie Eddie's about seventy and he ain't completely blind. Runs his thoughts mostly. He comes in once or twice a week and sticks a loaf of bread under his coat and walks out with an expression on his face like *there you stupid sunsandwiches ruined you again*.

Bertie once asked Henry why he never put a stop to it.

"I tell you," Henry said. "A few years back the Air Force wanted twenty million dollars to rig up a flying model of an

or they had, invited out. Well, it was them seventy  
pounds or so when the damn thing wouldn't fly. That  
happened yesterday when I and Eddie and myself were  
considering the case, and I'm too fond of the woman who  
sponsored it, but here I am to the end against her. And  
whether I've been biased by her.

Henry didn't look so he quite believed it. I think he  
sat back to muse over it.

Now the door opened again, and up it a burst of the cold  
winter air, but to me a young lad came in, stamping snow  
off his boots. I passed him after a second. He was like the  
old man's kid, and he looked like he had just kissed the  
winter wind off the hills. His Adam's apple was going up and  
down and his face was the colour of old iron.

'Mr. Hartman,' he says to Henry. 'My daddy is sitting  
at home in his chair like that breathing. You gotta come. You  
gotta take him his beer and come. I can't stand it. go back  
there. I'm scared.'

Now it's all down. Henry says, taking off his white  
butcher's apron and coming around the counter. 'What's  
the matter? Your dad been on a drunk?

I carried what he said that that Richie had been on for  
quite sometime. I used to hear him once a day to pick and  
use if whatever beer was getting cheapest at that time, and  
that man with a few like pork hams and ham hock arms.  
Richie always was a pig about his beer, but he had led a  
slim when he was working at the sawmill out in Cifton.  
Then something happened - a proper perfect bad lead, or  
maybe Richie just made it out that way - and Richie was off  
work free an' easy with the sawmill company paying him  
compensation. Something in his back. Anyway, he got  
awful fat. He hadn't been in nearly although once in a while  
I'd seen his boy come in for Richie's night's case. Nice  
enough boy. Henry seen him the beer for he knew it was  
only the boy to me as his a bit said.

'It's been that work that was saving him. But then  
and then he'll be it's - it's - where I don't know.'

Henry saw he was going to baw—so he says real quick  
Carl will you watch things for a minute?

Sure.

Now I mmy you come back into the stockroom and  
tell me what's what?

He led the boy away and Carl went around behind the  
counter and sat on Henry's stool. No one said anything for  
quite a while. We could hear 'em back there. Henry's deep  
saw voice and then Timmy Grenadine's high one speaking  
very fast. Then the boy commenced to cry and Bill Petham  
cleared his throat and started turning up his pipe.

I ain't seen Richie for a couple of months. I said

Ba I grunted. No loss.

He was in—oh near the end of October. Carl said  
Near Hal'ween. Bought a case of Schlitz beer. He was  
gettin' awful meaty.

There wasn't much more to say. The boy was still crying  
but he was talking at the same time. Outside the wind kept  
on whooping and howling and the radio said we'd have  
another six inches or so by morning. It was mid-January  
and it made me wonder if anyone had seen Richie since  
October—besides his boy—that is.

The talking went on for quite a while, but finally Henry  
and the boy came out. The boy had taken his coat off, but  
Henry had put his on. The boy was kinda hitching in his  
chest the way you do when the worst's past, but his eyes  
was red and when he glanced at you he'd look down at the  
floor.

Henry looked worried. I thought I'd send Timmy here  
upstairs an' have my wife cook him up a toasted cheese or  
somethin'. Maybe a couple of you fellas drove to go around  
to Richie's place w/ him. Timmy says he wants some beer.  
He gave me the money. He tried to smoke, but it was a  
pretty sick affair and he soon gave up.

Sure. Bertie says "What kind of beer?" I'll go fetch her.

Get Harrow's Supreme. Henry said. We got some  
cut down boxes back there.

I got up, too. It would have to be Bertie and me. Cat's arthritis gets something awful on days like this, and Bertie Petham don't have much use of his right arm anymore.

Bertie got four six packs of Harrow's and I packed them into a box while Henry took the box upstairs to the apartment, overhead.

Well, he straightened that out with his missus and came back down, looking over his shoulder once to make sure the upstairs door was closed. Henry spoke up, sorry busting. What's up? Has Richie been workin' the law over?

No, Henry said. I'd just as soon not say anything just yet. It'd sound crazy. I will show you something though. The money I always had to pay for the beer with. He shed four dollar bills out of his pocket, bending them by the corner, and I don't blame him. They was all covered with a grey, slimy stuff that looked like the scum on top of bad preserves. He laid them down on the counter with a funny smile and said to Cat. Don't let anybody touch 'em. Not if what the kid says is even half right.

And he went around to the sink by the meat counter and washed his hands.

I got up, put on my peacoat and scarf and hurried up. It was no good taking a car. Richie lived in an apartment building downtown on Curve Street, which have been a straight up and down as the law allows, and it's the last place the ploughs touch.

As we were going out, B.F. Petham called after us. Watch out, now.

Henry just nodded and put the case of Harrow's on the the handcart he keeps by the door, and out we trundled.

The wind hit us like a sawblade, and right away I pulled my scarf up over my ears. We paused in the doorway just for a second while Bertie pulled on his gloves. He had a papered sort of a face on his face, and I knew how he felt. It's all we forty-something fellows I go out skiing a day and running those goddam was-wings snowshoes had the night, but when you get up over seventy without an an-

change you see that north east wind around your heart

I don't want to scare you boss Henry said with that queer sort of reverent smile still on his mouth but I'm going to show you this at the same. And I'm going to tell you what the boy told me while we walk up the e... because I want you to know you see'

And he pulled a 45 calibre hogleg out of his coat pocket the pistol he'd kept loaded and ready under the counter ever since he went to twenty four hours a day back in 1958 I don't know where he got it but I do know the one time he flashed it at a stickup guy the fellow just turned around and beat right out the door Henry was a cool one alright I saw him throw out a college kid that came in one time and gave him a hard time about cashing a cheque That kid walked away like his ass was on sideways and he had to crap

Well I only tell you that because Henry wanted Bertie and me to know he meant business and we did too

So we set out bent on the wind like washerwomen Henry muttering that can and telling us what the boy had said The wind was trying to rip the words away before we could hear em but we got most of it more now we wanted to I was damn good Henry had his Frenchman's pecker stowed away in his coat pocket

The kid said I may have been the best... so I know how you can get a bad can every now and again Flat if smelly or green as the peestains in an Irishman's underwear A lot a once he come that a kid takes is impossible to get infected a that I do some damn strange things The hole can be so small that the beer won't hardly dribble out but the bacteria can get in And beer's good food to some of those bugs

Anyway the kid said Richie brought back a case of Golden Light just like always that night in October and sat down to polish it off while Lemmy did his homework

Lemmy was just about ready for bed when he heard Richie say Christ Jesus that am I right

And Timmy says 'What's that Pop?'

'That beer' Richie says 'Gawd that's the worst taste I ever had in my mouth.'

Most people would wonder why in the name of Gawd he drank it if it tasted so bad, but then most people have never seen Richie Grenouine gotsch a beer. I was down in Walley's Spa one afternoon, and I saw him win the goddamndest bet. He bet a fella he could drink twenty-two big glasses of beer in one minute. Nobody local would take him up, but this salesman from Montpelier laid down a twenty dollar bill and Richie covered him. He drank all twenty with seven seconds to spare, although when he walked out he was more or three sots into the wind. So I expect Richie had most of that bad can in his gut before his brain could warn him.

I'm gonna puke' Richie says 'Look at it'

But by the time he got to the head it had passed off, and that was the end of it. The boy said he smelt the can, and it smelt like something crow coo in there and died. There was a little grey drbble around the top, too.

Two days later the boy comes home from school and there's Richie sitting in front of the TV and watching the afternoon wearkeers with every goddamn shade in the place pulled down.

'What's up?' Timmy asks, for Richie don't hardly ever roll in before nine.

'I'm watchin' the TV' Richie says 'I don't seem to want to go out today'

Timmy turned on the light over the sink, and Richie yelled at him. 'And turn off that friggin' light.'

So Timmy did not asking how he's gonna do his home work in the dark. When Richie's in that mood, you don't ask him nothing.

'An' give me an' get me a case' Richie says, 'Money's on the table.'

'When the kid gets back his dad's still sitting in the dark, only now it's darker cause we too. And the TV's off. The kid

stats getting the creeps. Well who wouldn't? Nothing but a dark flat and your daddy sitting in the corner like a big lump.

So he puts the beer on the table knowing that Richie don't like it so cold it spikes his forehead and when he gets close to his old man he starts to notice a kind of rotten smell like an old cheese someone left standing on the counter over the weekend. He don't say shit or go blind though as the old man was never what you'd call a clean sort. Instead he goes into his room and shuts the door and does his homework and after a while he hears the TV start to go and Richie skipping the top of his list of the evening.

And for two weeks it's that's the way things went. The kid got up in the morning and went to school and when he got home Richie'd be in front of the television and beer money on the table.

The flat was smelling ranker and ranker too. Richie wouldn't have the shades up at all and about the middle of November he made Timmy stop studying in his room. Said he couldn't abide the sight under the door. So Timmy started going down the block to a friend's house after getting his dad the beer.

Then one day when Timmy came home from school it was four o'clock and pretty near dark already. Richie says 'Turn on the light.'

The kid turned on the light over the sink and damn if Richie ain't all wrapped up in a blanket.

'Look' Richie says and one hand creeps out from under the blanket. Only it ain't a hand at all. Something grey is all the kid could tell. Henry. Didn't look like a hand at all. Just a grey lump.

'Well Timmy creeps me' he was scared bad. He says 'Pop what's happening to you?'

And Richie says 'I dunno. But it don't hurt. It feels kinda nice.'

So Timmy says 'I'm gonna call Dr Westphal'

And the blanket starts to tremble a lover like something

and a was shaking all over under there. And R. he says  
don't you care if you do it each way and you end up  
like this. And he slides the hand off down to his face  
for just a minute.

By then we were up to the corner of Flax and Curse  
Street and I was even colder than the temperature had  
been in Henry's Orange Crush thermometer when we  
came out. A person doesn't hardly want to believe such  
things and yet here you are seeing things so however.

I once knew a fellow named Henry Kew who worked  
for the Boston Fire Department. He spent a sleep  
and a day and a night in the snow. He got it in the chest  
so that all his skin is he just an outfit not to be  
believed. And Frank Henderson who knew him  
said he once went to work at a saw mill in Essex and during  
a blizzard he was away all day and up in ten minutes  
he was white as a ghost and his eyes staring  
like he is sick. He was a window of it. It was  
struck down to the H.W. grade and pulled his stock  
and went down to Melvin Square with it. It was  
knocked him down and he had to be pulled back to  
the other end of it. And by the time he got it he had  
no hair when he was pretty well hit. I could not  
see such a spider as he was. And he never had  
seen a spider as big as a wasp. And he was setting it much  
up. Even such a wasp as a wasp setting it much  
up. He says to that I'm not saying he's crazy but  
admitting but there's bugs in the corners of the world they  
would you think even been he enough in the face

So we're still in the corner trying to insinuate he  
was but was whispering the story.

What the story? He asked.

He says to me as such he let them answer but  
he says it was a he was a big boy and it was  
a big boy he was after him. This is the way he was at  
such a point at it. Asked if the was not to be  
body.'

Hi's Jesus. Bertie said

Then he covete right up again and started screaming at the kid to turn off the light

Like he was a fungus I said

Yes Henry said Sorta like that

You keep that pistol handy Bertie said

Yes I think I will. And with that we started to trundle up Curve Street.

The apartment house where Richie Grenadine had his flat was almost at the top of the hill one of those big Victorian monsters that were built by the paper barons at the turn of the century. They've just about all been turned into apartment houses now. When Bertie got his breath he told us Richie lived on the third floor under that top gate that jutted out like an eyebrow. I took the chance to ask Henry what happened to the kid after tha

Along about the third week in November the kid came back one afternoon to find Richie had gone one further than just pulling the shades down. He'd taken and nailed blankets across every window in the place. It was starting to stink worse too kind of a mushy stink the way that gets when it goes to ferment with yeast.

A week or so after that Richie got the kid to start heating his beer in the stove. Can you imagine that? The kid stuck himself in that apartment with his dad turning one wet into something... an heating his beer and then having to listen to him... it... drinking it with awful thick slurping sounds the way an old man eats his chowder. Can you imagine it?

And that's the way things went on until today when the kid is school but late because of the storm.

The boy says he went right home Henry told us. There's no light in the upstairs hall at all the boy claims his dad musta struck out somethin' like a lighter so he had to sort of creep down to his door.

Well he heard somethin' noise upstairs and off he comes with a pop of his gun that he found I know what Richie

does it day through the week. He ain't seen his dad sit out of that chair for a most a month, and a man's got to sleep and go to the bathroom some time.

There's a hole here in the middle of the door, and it's supposed to have a latch on the inside to fasten it shut, but it's been busted ever since they lived there. So the kids, dressed up to the door real easy and pushed it open a bit with his thumb and pokes his eye up to it.

By now we were at the foot of the steps and the house was looming. We're like a high, ugly face with those windows on the third floor for eyes. I looked up there and sure enough those two windows were just as black as pitch. Like somebody's put blankets over 'em or painted 'em up.

It took him a minute to get his eye adjusted to the gloom. And then he seen a great big grey lump, not like a man at all, slitherin' over the floor, leavin' a grey, smoky trail behind it. And then it sort of snaked out an arm, or something like an arm, and pried a board off in the wall. And took out a cat. Henry stopped for a second. Bertie was beatin' his hands together and it was godawful cold out there on the street but none of us was ready to go up just yet. A dead cat. Henry recrimined, that had puffed out. The boy said it looked all swol' up stiff and there was little white things drawin' all over it.

'Stop,' Bertie said. 'For Christ's sake.'

'And then his dad ate it.'

I tried to swallow and something tasted greasy in my throat.

That's when Timmy closed the peephole. Henry finished swiftly. And ran.

'I don't think I can go up there,' Bertie said.

Henry didn't say anything, just looked from Bertie to me and back again.

'I guess we better,' I said. 'We got Richie's beer.'

Bertie didn't say anything to that, so we went up the steps and in through the front hall door. I smelled trash off.

'Do you know how a cooler house smells in summer? You

never get the smell of apples out, but in the fall it's a sight because it smells tangy and sharp enough to tear your nose right out. But in the summer it just smells mean, this smell, is like that, but a little bit worse.

There was one light on in the lower hall, a mean yellow thing in a frosted glass that threw a glow as thin as buttermilk. And those stars that went up into the shadows.

Henry bumped the cart to a stop, and while he was ringing out the case of beer, I thumbed the ball up at the foot of the stairs that could lead to the second floor landing bulk. But it was busted, just as the boy said.

Bertie quavered. "I'll lug the beer. You just take care of that pistol."

Henry didn't argue. He banded it over and we started up Henry first, then me, then Bertie with the case in his arms. By the time we had fetched the second floor landing the stink was just that much worse. Rotten apples, all fermenting, and under that an even uglier stink.

When I lived out in Levant I had a dog one time. Rex his name was, and he was a good mutt but not very wise about cars. He got hit a lick one afternoon while I was at work and he crawled under the house and died there. My Christ, what a stink. I finally had to go wolver and haul him out with a pole. That other stench was like that fly-brown and putrid and just as dirty as a barn cub.

Up, then I had kept thinking that maybe it was some sort of joke, but I saw it wasn't. Lord, why don't the neighbours kick up flarries? I asked.

What neighbours? Henry asked, and he was smiling that queer smile again.

I looked around and saw that the hall had a sort of dusty unused look and the door of all three second floor apartments was closed and locked up.

Who's the landlord, I wonder? Bertie asked, resting the case on the newel post and getting his breath. Gataleau? Surprised he don't kick 'im out.

Who'd go up there and evict him? Henry asked. You?

Bertie didn't say nothing.

Presently we started up the next flight, which was even narrower and steeper than the last. It was getting hotter too. It soon fed like every rad atom in the place was crackling and hissing. The smell I was awfu' and I started to feel like someone was stirring my guts with a stick.

At the top was a short hall and one door with a little Judas hole in the middle of it.

Bertie made a soft little cry and whispered out "Look what we're walkin' in!"

I looked down and saw all this stony stuff on the hall floor in little puddles. It looked like there'd been a carpet once, but the grey stuff had eaten it all away.

Henry walked down to the door and we went after him. I don't know about Bertie, but I was shaking in my shoes. Henry never hesitated, though, he raised up that gun and beat on the door with the butt of it.

"Richie," he called, and his voice didn't sound a bit scared, although his face was deadly pale. "This is Henry. Parmalee. I'm down at the Nite Owl. I brought you beer."

There wasn't any answer for perhaps a full minute, and then a voice said, "Where's Emmy? Where's my boy?"

"I almost ran right then. That's nice wave I'm up at all. It was quicker as low an bubbly like someone taking through a mouthful of suet."

"He's at my store," Henry said. "Have a decent meal. He's just as skinny as a scrawny cat." Richie

There wasn't nothing for a while, and then some horrible squishing noises, like a man in rubber boots walking the dog mad. Then that decayed voice spoke right through the other side of the door.

"Open the door and shove that beer through," I said. "Or I'll get to you at the ring tabs first. I can't."

"In a minute," Henry said. "What kind of shape you in, Richie?"

"Never mind that," the voice said, and it was horribly eager, "just push in the beer and go."

It ain't just dead cats any more, is it? Henry said, and he sounded sad. He wasn't the man the gun built-up any more, now it was business end first.

And suddenly, in a flash of light I made the mental connection Henry had already made perhaps even as Timmy was telling his story. The smell of decay and rot seemed to deaden in my nostrils when I remembered. Two young girls and some old Salvation Army women had disappeared in town during the last three weeks or so all after dark.

Send it on or I come out and get it the voice said.

Henry gestured us back and we went.

I guess you better, Richie. He cocked his piece.

There was nothing then, not for a long time. I told the truth. I began to feel as if I was all over. Then that door burst open so sudden and so hard that it actually bulged before smashing out against the wall. And out came Richie.

It was just a second just a second before Bertie and me was down those stairs like schoolkids, four and five at a time and out the door into the snow sippin an' sipping.

Going down we heard Henry fire three times the reports like grenades in the closed hallways of that crap-cursed house.

What we saw in that one or two seconds will last me a lifetime or whatever's left of it. It was like a huge grey wave of jelly that looked like a man and leaving a trail of slime behind it.

But that wasn't the worst. Its eyes were flat and yet wide and wild with no human soul in 'em. Only there wasn't two. There were four, one right down the centre of the thing between the two pairs of eyes, was a white fibrous line with a kind of pulsing pink flesh showing through like a slit in a hog's belly.

It was dying, you see. Dying in two.

Bertie and I didn't say nothing to each other going back to the store. I don't know what was going through his mind.

but I know we I enough what was in mine the multiplication table Two times two is four four times two is eight eight times two is sixteen, sixteen times two is

We got back Cat and Bill Peabody jumped up and started asking questions right off. We wouldn't answer neither of us. We just turned around and waited to see if Henry was gonna walk in outta the snow. I was up to 32 768 times two is the end of the human race and so we sat there cozied up to all that beer and waited to see which one was going to finally come back, and here we still sit

I hope it's Henry I sure y do

## BATTLEGROUND

'Mr Renshaw?'

The desk clerk's voice caught him halfway to the elevator and Renshaw turned back impatiently, shifting his flight bag from one hand to the other. The envelope in his coat pocket, studded with twenties and fifties, crackled heavily. The job had gone well and the pay had been excellent, even after the Organization's 15 per cent finder's fee had been skimmed off the tip. Now all he wanted was a hot shower and a gin and tonic and sleep.

'What is it?'

'Package, sir. Would you sign the slip?'

Renshaw signed and looked thoughtfully at the rectangular package. His name and the building's address were written on the gummed label in a spiky backhand script that seemed familiar. He rocked the package on the imitation marble surface of the desk, and something clinked faintly inside.

'Should I have that sent up, Mr Renshaw?'

'No. I've got it. It was about eighteen inches on a side and fitted clumsily under his arm. He put it on the plush carpet that covered the elevator floor and twisted his key in the penthouse slot above the regular rack of buttons. The car rose smoothly and silently. He closed his eyes and let the job replay itself on the dark screen of his mind.

First, as always, a call from Cat Bailes. 'You available, Johnny?'

He was available twice a year, minimum fee \$1,000. He

was very good, very efficient, but what his customers only paid for was the initial, the pre-elder status. John Renshaw was a human hawk, constrained by both genetics and environment to do two things superbly well and survive.

After Bates' visit, a half-closed envelope appeared in Renshaw's box. A name, an address, a photograph. All committed to memory, then down the garbage disposal with the ashes of envelope and contents.

This time the face had been that of a young Miami businessman named Harry Morris, founder and owner of the Morris Tax Company. Someone had wanted Morris out of the way and had gone to the Organization. The Organization, in the person of Calen Bates, had taken John Renshaw from Morris' please own flowers.

The doors were open, he picked up his package and stepped out. He unlocked his suite and stepped in. At this time of day, just after 4 p.m., the sidewalk in front was splashed with April sunshine. He paused for a moment, carrying it, then put the package on the end table by the door and returned to his tie. He slipped the envelope on top of it and walked over to the terrace.

He pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped out. It was cold and the wind bit through his thin jacket. Yet he paused for a moment, looking over the city the way a general might survey a captured country. The crowded boulevards in the streets, far away, a faint band in the general afternoon haze, the Bay Bridge glittered like a man in a tuxedo. To the east, as far as he could see, the downtown high-rises, the crammed and dirty tenements with their stainless steel crevices, TV aerials. It was better up here. Better than in the galleries.

He went back inside, set the door closed, and went into the bathroom for a long hot shower.

When he sat down forty minutes later, he took his package from his hand. The shadows had thickened but was across the wide-circulated cause, and the best of the afternoon was past.

## *It was a bomb*

Of course I wasn't having the process class if it were. That was why one had remained upright and taking nourishment while so many others had gone to that great unemployment office in the sky.

If it was a bomb it was clockless. It sat utterly silent, bland and enigmatic. Plasticine was more likely these days anyway. Less temperamental than the clocksprings manufactured by Westclox and Big Ben.

Renshaw looked at the postmark. Miami. 5 April. Five days ago. So the bomb was not time set. It would have gone off in the hotel safe in that case.

Miami. Yes. And that spiky hand-and writing. There had been a framed photograph on the safelock businessman's desk. The photo had been of an even-tempered old man wearing a babushka. The script scrawled across the bottom had read: Best from your number one idea girl. Miami.

What kind of a number one idea girl? Miami? A death-worsted extermination kit?

He regarded the package with complete concentration, not moving his hands toward it. Extraneous questions such as how Morris's number one idea girl might have discovered his address did not occur to him. They were for later, for Cal Bates. Unimportant now.

With a sudden, almost absent move, he took a small, folded calendar out of his wallet and inserted it deftly under the twine that crisscrossed the brown paper. He slid it under the Scotch tape that he'd one end flap. The flap came loose, rattling against the wine.

He paused for a time, observing then, canted close and snipped. Cardboard paper, string. Nothing more. He walked around the box, snipped easily on his bounces and repeated the process. Twine was insinuating his apartment with grey, shadowy fingers.

One of the flaps popped free of the restraining wine, showing a dull green box beneath. Metal. Hinged. He produced a pocket knife and cut the twine. It fell away and

a few helping pricks with the tip of the knife rescued the box.

It was green with black markings and stenciled on the front in white letters were the words 1-108 VETERAN  
FOR TROOPER Below that 20 Infantrymen 3 Helicopters 2  
BAR Men 2 Bazooka Men 2 Medics 4 Jeeps Below that  
a flag decal Below that in the corner Morris Toy Com-  
pany, Miami, Fla.

He reached out to touch it, then withdrew his hand. Something on or the front locker had moved.

Renshaw stood up, hurrying and backed across the room towards the kitchen and the hall. He snapped on the lights.

The Vietnam Footlocker was rocking, making the brown paper beneath a bit rattie. It suddenly overbalanced and fell to the carpet which it had leaning on one end. The hinged top opened a crack of perhaps two inches.

Two hot soldiers, about an inch and a half tall, began to crawl out. Renshaw watched them unbanking. His mind made no effort to cope with the real or unreal aspects of what he was seeing, only with the possible consequences for his survival.

The soldiers were wearing minuscule army fatigues, helmets and held packs. Two carbines were slung across their shoulders. Two of them looked briefly across the room at Renshaw. The eyes, as bigger than pencil points, glittered.

Five, ten, twelve, then all twenty. One of them was gesturing, ordering the others. They lined themselves up along the crack that the fall had produced and began to push. The crack began to widen.

Renshaw picked one of the large pillows off the couch and began to walk towards them. The commanding officer turned and gestured. The others whirled and unslung their carbines. There were low, a most delicate popping sounds and Renshaw felt suddenly as if he had been stung by bees.

He threw the pillow. It struck them, knocking them

sprawling then hit the box and knocked it wide open insectlike with a faint high whirring noise like chiggers. a cloud of miniature helicopters painted jungle green rose out of the box

Tiny *phat phat* sounds reached Renshaw's ears and he saw pinprick sized muzzle flashes coming from the open copter doors. Needles pricked his belly his right arm the side of his neck. He clawed out and got one sudden pain in his fingers blood welting. The whirling blades had chopped them to the bone in diagonal scarlet hash marks. The others whirred out of range circling him like horseflies. The stricken copter thumped to the rug and lay still.

Sudden excruciating pain in his foot made him cry out. One of the foot soldiers was standing on his shoe and bayoneting his ankle. The tiny face looked up panting and grinning.

Renshaw kicked at it and the tiny body flew across the room to spatter on the wall. It did not leave blood but a weird purple smear.

There was a tiny coughing explosion and blinding agony ripped his thigh. One of the bazooka men had come out of the footlocker. A small curl of smoke rose lazily from his weapon. Renshaw looked down at his leg and saw a blackened smoking hole in his pants the size of a quarter. The flesh beneath was charred.

#### *The little bastard shot me*

He turned and ran into the hall then into his bedroom. One of the helicopters buzzed past his cheek blades whirling busily. The small stammer of a BAR. Then it darted away.

The gun beneath his pillow was a 44 Magnum big enough to put a hole the size of two fists through anything it hit. Renshaw turned holding the pistol in both hands. He realized coolly that he would be shooting at a moving target not much bigger than a flying light bulb.

Two of the copters whirred in. Sitting on the bed Renshaw fired once. One of the helicopters exploded into

nothingness. That's two he thought. He drew a bead on the second... squeezed the trigger.

~~It gagged. Conditioned to gagged.~~

The helicopter swooped at him in a sudden deadly arc, and all five head props whirring with blinding speed. Renshaw caught a glimpse of one of the BAR men crouched at the open bay door, firing his weapon in short, deadly bursts, and then he threw himself to the floor and rolled.

~~My eyes, the bastard was going for my eyes!~~

He came up in his back at the far wall, the gun held at chest level. But the copter was retreating. It seemed to pause for a moment, and then in recognition of Renshaw's superior firepower. Then it was gone, back towards the living room.

Renshaw got up slowly as his weight came down on the wounded leg. It was bleeding freely. And why not, he thought grimly. It's not everybody who gets shot point blank with a buzzsaw she had, very little I dare say.

So Mum was his number one idea girl, was she. She was all that and a bit more.

He shook a pile of case liner off the gun strips, took a bandage for his leg, then took his shaving mirror from the bureau and went to the hallway door. Knocking, he shoved it open to the carpet at an angle and peered in.

They were his knocking at the front door, damned. They weren't. His mate's son ran by, her and thither, setting up tents. Jeeps two or three high raced about impatiently. A man in white working over the window. Renshaw had to let it. The remaining eight copters flew in a protective swarm overhead, at a three thousand level.

Suddenly they became aware of the mirror and broke off the front wall. It dropped to the floor and broken into pieces. Seconds later the mirror was shattered in few pieces. Okay, okay, then.

Renshaw went back to the bureau and got the heavy maul gun. He was and ends next Linda had given him to

Christmas. He hefted it once, nosed, and went to the doorway and angled brough. He wound up and fired like a pitcher throwing a fast ball. The boxer set his jaw, a swift true vector, and smashed Little men like ninepins. One of the jeeps rolled over twice. Renshaw advanced to the doorway of the living room, sighted on one of the sprawling soldiers and gave it to him.

Several of the others had recovered. Some were kneeling and firing formally. Others had taken cover. And others had retreated back into the footlocker.

The bee stings began to pepper his legs and torso, but none reached higher than his rib cage. Perhaps the range was too great. It didn't matter, he had no intention of being turned away. This was it.

He missed with his next shot — they were so goddamn small — but the following one sent another soldier into a broken sprawl.

The choppers were buzzing towards him ferociously. Now the tiny bullets began to splat into his face above and below his eyes. He potted the lead chopper, then the second. Jagged streaks of pain seared his vision.

The remaining six split into two retreating wings. His face was wet with blood and he swiped at it with his forearm. He was ready to start firing again when he paused. The soldiers who had retreated into the footlocker were brandishing something out. Something that rocked like

There was a blinding staccato of explosive and a sudden gout of wood and plaster exploded from the wall of his left, a *rocket launcher!*

He squeezed off one shot at it, missed, wheeled and ran for the bathroom at the far end of the corridor. He slammed the door and locked it. In the bathroom, horror, an Indian was staring back at him with glazed and haunted eyes, a battle-crazed and an with thin streamers of red paint drawn from his eyes, bigger than grains of pepper. A jagged flap of skin dangling from one cheek. There was a gouged furrow in his neck.

*I'm losing!*

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. The front door was cut off. He was the phone and the kitchen extension. They had a god damn rocket launcher and a direct hit would tear his head off.

*burn it out! burn it out! burn it out! burn it out!*

He started to draw in a long breath and let it out in a sudden grating and fast-serve sort of. The door blew in with a charred burst of wood. Las Flamingo was briefly up and the jagged edge of the hole, and he saw the brilliant flash as her launched another round. More wood blew inward scattering burning papers on the bathroom rug. He stamped them out and two of the cockpit buzzed angrily through the hole. More of the HAR bugs stashed his chest.

With a whining groan of rage he smashed one out of the air barehanded, sustaining a picket fence of deep slashes across his palm. In sudden desperation he snatched a heavy bath towel over the other. It fell writhing to the floor, and he stamped the re-cut slot. His breath was coming in hissing whoops. Blood ran into one eye, hot and stinging, and he wiped it away.

*There, you found. There. That'll make them think.*

Indeed, it did seem to be making them think. There was no movement for fifteen minutes. Renshaw sat in the edge of the tub, thinking feverishly. There had to be a way out of this bind, there. There had to be. If there was, there was a way to flank them.

He suddenly turned and looked at the small window over the tub. There was a way. Of course there was.

His eyes clapped to the candlelight fluid on top of the medicine cabinet. He was reaching for it when the rustling noise came.

He whirred, bringing the Magnum up—but it was only a crumpled paper shoved under the crack of the door. The crack. Renshaw twisted grimly, wishing for more force, one of them being through.

There was one tiny word written on the paper:

Renshaw snorted grimly and put the lighter fluid in his breast pocket. There was a chewed stub of pencil beside it. He scrawled one word on the paper and shoved it back under the door. The word was

### NUTS

There was a sudden, blinding barrage. Rocket she is, and Renshaw backed away. They arched through the hole in the door and detonated against the pale blue tiles above the towel rack, turning the elegant wall into a pocket lunar lan escape. Renshaw threw a hand over his eyes as plaster flew in a hot rain of shrapnel. Burning holes rippled through his shirt and his back was peppered.

When the barrage stopped, Renshaw moved. He climbed on top of the tub and slid the window open. Cold stars looked in at him. It was a narrow window, and a narrow ledge beyond it. But there was no time to think of that.

He boosted himself through, and the cold air slapped his acerated face and neck like an open hand. He was leaning over the balance points of his hands, staring straight down. Forty stories down. From this height the street looked no wider than a child's train track. The bright working lights of the city glittered madly below him like thrown jewels.

With the deceptive ease of a trained gymnast, Renshaw brought his knees up to rest on the lower edge of the window. If one of those wasp-sized copters flew through that hole in the door now, one shot in the ass would send him straight down, screaming as he was.

None did.

He twisted, thrust one leg out, and one reaching hand grabbed the overhead cornice and held. A moment later he was standing on the edge edge of the window.

Deliberately not thinking of the horrifying drop below.

his back - not thinking of what would happen if one of the helicopters buzzed out after him. Renshaw edged towards the corner of the building.

Fourteen feet - ten. There. He paused, his chest pressed against the wall, hands spread out on the rough surface. He could feel the lighter load in his breast pocket, and the reassuring weight of the Magnum ammed in his waistband.

Now to get around, he goddamn clever.

Clearly he eased one foot around and slid his weight in. Now the right angle was pressed razor-like into his chest and gut. There was a smear of bird guano in front of his eyes on the rough stone. Christ, he thought crazily. I didn't know they could fly this high.

His left foot slipped.

For a weird, timeless moment he tottered over the brink, right arm back, watering madly for balance, and then he was clutching the two sides of the building in a lover's embrace, face pressed against the hard corner, breath shouldering in and out of his lungs.

A bit at a time he slid the other foot around.

Thirty feet away his own living room terrace jutted out.

He made his way down to it, breaths riding in and out of his lungs with sharp pain. Twice he was forced to stop as sharp gusts of wind tried to pick him off the ledge.

Then he was there, gripping the ornamented iron railings.

He blasted himself over no selesso. He had left the curtains half drawn across the sliding part, open and now he peered in cautious as a. They were just the way he wanted them - ass to

Four soldiers and one copter had been left to guard the footlocker. The rest would be outside the bathroom door with the rocket launcher.

Okay. In through the opening. The gangbusters. We open the inside by the footlocker then out the door. Then a quick

taxi to the airport. Off to Miami to find Morris's number one. A girl. He thought he might just burn her face off with a flame thrower. That would be poetic justice.

He took off his shirt and ripped a long strip from one sleeve. He dropped the rest to flutter limply by his feet and bit off the plastic seal on the can of lighter fluid. He stuffed one end of the rag inside, withdrew it, and started the other end in so on a six inch strip of saturated cloth hung free.

He got out his lighter, took a deep breath, and thumbed the wheel. He tipped it to the cloth and as it sprang alight he rammed open the glass partition and plunged through.

The copter reacted instantly, kamikaze diving him as he charged across the rug, dropping my strip after a 11 yard fire. Renshaw straight armoured it, barely noticing the jet of pain that ran up his arm as the turning blades chopped his flesh open.

The tiny foot soldiers scattered into the fox hole.

After that, it all happened very rapidly.

Renshaw threw the lighter fluid. The can caught mushrooming into a crackling fireball. The next instant he was reversing, running for the door.

He never knew what hit him.

It was like the thud that a steel safe would make when dropped from a respectable height. Only this thud ran through the entire high-rise apartment building, thumping in its steel frame like a tuning fork.

The penthouse roof blew off, its bridges and shingled against the far wall.

A couple who had been walking hand in hand below locked up in time to see a very large white flash, as though a hundred flashguns had gone off at once.

Somebody blew a fuse, the man said. I guess.

What's that? his girl asked.

Something was falling, drifting down towards them, he caught it in one outstretched hand. Jesus, some guy's shirt. A lot of little holes. Bloody god.

I don't like it she said nervously Call a cab, hah, Ralph! We'll have to talk to the cops if something happened up there and I am not supposed to be out with you

'Sure, yeah.'

He looked around saw a tax , and whistled Its brake Lights flared and they ran across to get it

Behind them unseen a tiny scrap of paper floated down and landed near the remains of John Renshaw's shirt Spiky backhand script read

*Hey, kids Special in this Vietnam Footlocker*

(For a Limited Time Only)

1 Rocket Launcher

20 Surface-to-Air Twister Missiles

1 Scale-Model Thermonuclear Weapon

## TRUCKS

The guy's name was Snuggrass and I could see him getting ready to do something crazy. His eyes had got bigger showing a lot of the whites like a dog getting ready to fight. The two kids who had come skidding into the parking lot in the old Fury were trying to talk to him but his head was cocked as though he was hearing other voices. He had a tight little potbelly encased in a good suit that was getting a little shiny in the seat. He was a salesman and he kept his display bag close to him like a pet dog that had gone to sleep.

Try the radio again the truck driver at the counter said.

The short order cook shrugged and turned it on. He flipped it across the band and got nothing but static.

You went too fast the trucker protested. You might have missed something.

He'll the short order cook said. He was an elderly black man with a smile of gold and he wasn't looking at the trucker. He was looking through the dimly lit picture window at the parking lot.

Seven or eight heavy trucks were out there engines rumbling in low idling roars that sounded like big cats purring. There were a couple of Macks a Hemi ngway and four or five Reos. Trailer trucks interstate banners with a lot of license plates and CB whip antennas on the back.

The old Fury was lying on its roof at the end of long screeching skid marks in the loose crushed rock of the parking lot. It had been battered into senseless junk. At the

entrance to the track stop a turnar around there was a busted C a t a l a c . Its owner stated out of the star shattered wind- shield like a gutterfish. Hornrimmed glasses hung from one ear.

Halfway across the lot from it lay the body of a girl in a pink dress. She had jumped from the C a t a c when she saw it wasn't going to make it. She had been running but never had a chance. She was the worst, even though she was face down. There were flies around her eyeballs.

Across the road an old Ford station wagon had been rammed through the banditario. That had happened an hour ago. No one had been by since then. You couldn't see the turnpike from the window and the phone was out.

You went too fast, the trucker was protesting. You oughta.

That was when Snodgrass bolted. He turned the table over getting up, smashing coffee cups and scattering sugar in a wood spray. His eyes were wider than ever, and his mouth hung loose, and he was blabbering. We gotta get outta here we gotta get outta here we gotta get outta here.

The kid showed and his girl friend screamed.

I was on the stool closest to the door and I got a hand full of his shirt but he tore loose. He was cranked up all the way. He would have gone through a bank vault door.

He slammed out the door and then he was springing across the gravel towards the drainage ditch on the left. Two of the trucks lunged after him, smokestacks blowing diesel exhaust dark brown agains the sky, huge rear wheels machine gunning gravel up in spray.

He couldn't have been any more than five or six running steps from the edge of the flat parking lot when he turned back to look, tear scrawled on his face. It's feet tangled each other and he faltered and a move fell down. He got his balance again, but it was too late.

One of the trucks gave way and the other charged down, huge front grill glistening savagely in the sun. Snoddy just

screamed the sound high and thin nearly lost under the  
Reo's heavy diesel roar

It didn't drag him under. As things turned out, it would  
have been better if it had. Instead it drove him up and out  
the way a punter kicks a football. For a moment he was  
silhouetted against the hot afternoon sky like a crippled  
scarecrow and then he was gone into the drainage ditch.

The big truck's brakes hissed like dragon's breath, its  
front wheels locked digging grooves into the gravel skin of  
the lot, and it stopped inches from jackknifing in. The  
bastard.

The girl in the booth screamed. Both hands were  
clamped into her cheeks dragging the flesh down turning  
it into a witch's mask.

Glass broke. I turned my head and saw that the trucker  
had squeezed his glass hard enough to break it. I don't think  
he knew it yet. Milk and a few drops of blood fell onto the  
counter.

The black counterman was frozen by the radio a dish-  
cloth in hand looking amazed. His teeth glinted. For a  
moment there was no sound but the buzzing Westclox and  
the rumbling of the Reo's engine as it returned to its  
fenders. Then the girl began to cry and it was all right or at  
least better.

My own car was around the side also battered to junk. It  
was a 1971 Camaro and I had still been paying on it but I  
didn't suppose that mattered now.

There was no one in the trucks.

The sun glinted and flashed on empty cans. The wheels  
turned themselves. You can't think about it too much.  
You'd go insane if you thought about it too much. Like  
Snodgrass.

Two hours passed. The sun began to go down. Out of the  
trucks patrolled in slow circles and figure eights. Their  
parking lights and running lights had come on.

I walked the length of the counter twice to get the knots  
out of my legs and then sat in a booth by the long front

window. It was a standard truck stop, close to the major throughways, a complete service fact is not back, gas and diesel fuel both. The truckers came here for coffee and pie.

Miyer: The voice was hesitant.

I looked around. It was the two kids from the Fury. The boy looked about nineteen. He had long hair and a beard that was just starting to take hold. His girl looked younger.

Yeah?

What happened to you?

I shrugged. I was coming up the interstate to Peoria. I said. A truck came up behind me. I could see it in the mirror, going way off, real s-h-e-b-b-a-g. You could hear it a mile down the road. It whipped out around a VW beetle and just snapped it off the road with the whiplash of the trailer, the way you'd snap a bad oil paper out a table with your finger. I thought the truck would go too. No driver could have held it with the trailer whipping that way. But I didn't go. The VW flipped over six or seven times and exploded. And the truck got the next one coming up the same way. It was coming up on me and I took the exit ramp in a hurry. I laughed but my heart wasn't. Right then a truckstop, of all places. From the Irving pan into the fire.

The girl swallowed. We saw a Greyhound going north on the southbound lane. It was... piecemeal... through cars. It exploded and burned but before it did... slaughter.

A Greyhound bus. That was something new. And bad. Outside, all the headlights suddenly popped on in an instant, bathing the lot in an eerie, depthless glare. Growing, they cruised back and forth. The headlights seemed to give them eyes, and so the growing gloom, the dark trachea bones looked like the hunched, squared off shoulders of prehistoric giants.

The girl remained silent. Is it safe to turn on the lights?

Don't, I said, and I did not.

He flipped the switches and a series of thumping grumbles over head came on. At the same time a neon sign out front

stuttered into life. Conant's Truck Stop & Diner - Good Lats' Nothing happened. The trucks continued their patrol.

I can't understand it, the trucker said. He had gotten down from his stool and was walking around his hand wrapped in a red engineer's bandanna. I ain't had no problems with my rig. She's a good old girl. I pulled in here a little past nine for a spaghetti dinner and this happens. He waved his arms and the bandanna flapped. My own rig's out there right now, the one with the weak left tail light. Been driving her for six years. But I stepped out that door -

It's just starting, the counterman said. His eyes were hooded and obsidian. It must be bad if that radio's gone. It's just starting.'

The girl had drained as pale as milk. 'Never mind that,' I said to the counterman. 'Not yet.'

What would do it? The trucker was worrying. 'Electrical storms in the atmosphere? Nuclear testing? What?'

Maybe they're mad, I said.

Around seven o'clock I walked over to the counterman. How are we fixed here? I mean, if we have to stay a while?

His brow wrinkled. Not so bad. Yesterday was delivery day. We got two-those hundred hamburgers, canned fruit and vegetables, dry cereal, bags - no more milk than what's in the cooler, but the water's from the well. If we had to, the five of us could get on for a month or more.'

The trucker came over and blinked at us. I'm dead out of cigarettes. Now that cigarette machine.

It ain't my machine, the counterman said. 'No sir.'

The trucker had a steel pinch bar he'd got in the supply room out back. He went to work on the machine.

The kid went down to where the jukebox gathered and flashed and plugged in a quarter. John Fogarty began to sing about being born on the bayou.

I sat down and looked out the window. I saw something I

didn't like right away. A Chevy light pickup had joined the patrol. Like a Shetland pony am a Percheron. I watched. I and the robed impartially over the body of the girl from the Caddy and then I looked away.

*We made them'* the girl cried out with sudden wretchedness. 'They can't.'

Her boy friend tried her to bush. The trucker got the cigarette machine open and helped himself to six more packs of Viceroys. He put them in different pockets and then tipped one pack open. From the intent expression on his face I wasn't sure if he was going to smoke them or eat them up.

Another record came on the juke. It was eight o'clock.

At eight-thirty the power went off.

When the lights went the girl screamed a cry that stopped suddenly as if her boy friend had put his hand over her mouth. The jukebox died with a deepening, rewinding sound.

What the Christ' the trucker said.

Counterman' I called. You got any candles?

I think so. Wait... yeah, there's a few.

I got up and took them. We lit them and started placing them around. Be careful, I said. If we burn the place down there's the dev I to pay.

He chuckled morosely. You know it.

When we were done placing the candles the kid and his girl were huddled together and the trucker was by the back door, watching six more heavy trucks weaving in and out between the concrete buildings. This changes things, doesn't it? I said.

Damn right. If the power's gone for good.

How bad?

Hamburg I go over in three days. Rest of the meat and args I go by about as quick. The cars will be okay on the dry stuff. But that ain't the worst. We ain't gonna have no water without the pump.'

How long?

'W thout no water? A week ?

'F L, every empty jug you've got. Fill them 'till you can't draw anything but air. Where are the toilets? There's good water in the tanks.'

Employees' res room is in the back. But you have to go outside to get to the lady s and gent s

Across to the service building? I wasn't ready for that  
Not yet

No. Out the side door an up a ways

'Give me a couple of buckets

He found two galvanized pails. The kid strolled up

'What are you doing ?

'We have to have water. All we can get

'Give me a bucket then

I handed him one

'Jerry!' the girl cried. You -

He looked at her and she didn't say anything else, but she picked up a napkin and began to tear at the corners. The trucker was smoking another cigarette and grinning at the floor. He didn't speak up

We walked over to the side door where I'd come in that afternoon and stood there for a second, watching the shadows wax and wane as the trucks went back and forth

'Now?' the kid said. His arm brushed mine and the muscles were jumping and humming like wires. If anyone bumped him he'd go straight up to heaven

'Relax,' I said

He smiled a little. It was a sick smile, but better than none

'Okay.'

We slipped out

The night air had cooled. Crickets chirred in the grass, and frogs thumped and croaked in the drainage ditch. Out here the rumble of the trucks was louder, more menacing, the sound of beasts. From inside it was a movie. Out here it was real, you could get killed

We slid along the tiled outer wall. A high overhang gave

as some shadow. My Camaro was huddled against the cyclone fence across from us and faint light from the roadside sign glinted on broken metal and puddles of gas and oil.

You take the lady's I whispered. & I your bucket from the toilet tank and wait.

Steady diesel rumblings. It was tricky you thought they were coming but it was only echoes bouncing off the building's odd corners. It was only twenty feet but I seemed much further.

He opened the lady's room door and went in. I went past and then I was inside the gent's. I could feel my muscles tense and a breath whistled out of me. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror: strained white face with dark eyes.

I got the porcelain tank cover off and dunked the bucket full. I poured all the back to keep from sloshing and went to the door. 'Hey?'

'Yeah,' he breathed.

'You ready?'

'Yeah.'

We went out again. We got maybe six steps before lights blared in our faces. It had crept up big wheels bare, turning on the gravel. It had been lying in wait and now it leaped at us electric headlamps glowing in savage circles the huge chrome grill seeming to snarl.

The kid froze, his face stamped with horror his eyes blank the pupils dilated down to pinpricks. I gave him a hard shove splitting half his water.

'Go!'

The thunder of that diesel engine rose to a shriek. I reached over the kid's shoulder to yank the door open, but before I could it was shoved from inside. The kid lunged in and I dodged after him. I looked back to see the truck a big cab-over Peterbilt kiss off the tiled outside wall peeling away jagged hunks of tile. There was an ear-grinding squealing noise like gigantic fingers scraping a blackboard. Then the right mudguard and the corners of

the grill smashed into the still-open door sending glass in a crystal spray and snapping the door's steel-gauge hinges like tissue paper. The door flew into the night like something out of a Dalí painting and the truck accelerated towards the front parking lot, its exhaust racketing like machine-gun fire. It had a disappointed angry sound.

The kid put his bucket down and collapsed into the girl's arms, shuddering.

My heart was thudding heavily in my chest and my calves felt like water. And speaking of water we had brought back about a bucket and a quarter between us. It hardly seemed worth it.

I want to block up that doorway, I said to the counterman. What will do the trick?

Well —

The trucker broke in. Why? One of those big trucks couldn't get a wheel in through there.

It's not the big trucks I'm worried about.

The trucker began hunting for a smoke.

'We got some sheet siding out in the supply room the counterman said. Boss was gonna put up a shed to store butane gas.'

'We'll put them across and prop them with a couple of booths.'

It'll help, the trucker said.

It took about an hour and by the end we'd all got into the act, even the girl. It was fairly solid. Of course fairly solid wasn't going to be good enough, not if something hit it at full speed. I think they all knew that.

There were still three booths ranged along the big glass picture window and I sat down in one of them. The clock behind the counter had stopped at 8:32 but it felt like ten. Outside the truck prowled and growled. Some left, hurrying off to unknown missions and others came. There were three pickup trucks now circling importantly amid their bigger brothers.

I was starting to doze and instead of counting sheep I

counted trucks. How many in the state, how many in America? Trailer trucks, pickup trucks, flatbeds, day haulers, three-quarter tons, army convoy trucks by the tens of thousands, and buses. Nightmare vision of a city bus, two wheels in the gutter and two wheels on the pavement, roaring along and ploughing through screaming pedestrians like ninepins.

I shook it off and fell into a light, troubled sleep.

It must have been early morning when Snodgrass began to scream. A thin new moon had risen and was shining coldly through a high scud of clouds. A new, chattering note had been added, counterpointing the throaty, idling roar of the big rigs. I looked for it and saw a hay baler cutting out by the darkened sign. The moonlight glanced off the sharp, turning spoke of its passer.

The scream came again, unmistakably from the drainage ditch. Help — *meeeeee*

What was that? It was the girl. In the shadows her eyes were wide and she looked horribly frightened.

Nothing, I said.

Help — *meeeeee . . .*

Help — she whispered. Oh God, Anne.

I didn't have to see him. I could imagine him, too well. Snodgrass lying half in and half out of the drainage ditch, back and legs broken, carefully pressed so it leaked with mud. White, gasping face turned up to the indifferent moon.

I don't hear anything, I said. Do you?

She looked at me. How can you? Help?

Now if you woke him up, I said, jerking a thumb at the kid, he might hear something. He might go out there. Would you like that?

Her face began to twitch and pull as if stitched by invisible needles. Nothing, she whispered. Nothing out there.

She went back to her boy friend and pressed her head

against his chest. His arms came up around her in his sleep.

No one else woke up. Snodgrass cried and wept and screamed for a long time, and then he stopped.

## Dawn

Another truck had arrived, this one a flatbed with a giant rack for hauling cars. It was joined by a bulldozer. That scared me.

The trucker came over and twitched my arm. Come on back, he whispered excitedly. The others were still sleeping. Come look at this.

I followed him back to the supply room. About ten trucks were patrolling out there. At first I didn't see anything new.

See? he said, and pointed. Right there.

Then I saw. One of the pickups was stripped dead. It was sitting there like a lump, all the menace gone out of it.

'Out of gas?'

That's right, buddy. *And they can't pump their own.* We got it knocked. All we have to do is wait. He smiled and fumbled for a cigarette.

It was about nine o'clock and I was eating a piece of yesterday's pie for breakfast when the air horn began - long, rolling blasts that turned your skull. We went over to the windows and looked out. The trucks were sitting still. One trailer truck, a huge Reo with a red cab, had pulled up almost to the narrow verge of grass between the restaurant and parking lot. At this distance the square grill was huge and murderous. The tires would stand to a man's chest cavity.

The horn began to blare again, hard, hungry blasts that traveled off in straight, flat lines and echoed back. There was a pattern. Shorts and longs in some kind of rhythm.

That's Morse, the kid Jerry suddenly exclaimed.

The trucker looked at him. How would you know?

The kid went a little red. I earned it in the Boy Scouts.

You? the trucker said. You? Wow. He shook his head. Never mind, I said. Do you remember enough to

Sure. Let me listen. Got a pencil?"

The counterman gave him one and the kid began to write letters on a napkin. After a while he stopped. It's saying 'Attention' over and over again. Wait.

We waited. The air horn beat its longs and shorts into the still morning air. Then the pattern changed and the kid started to write again. We hung over his shoulders and watched the message form. "Someone must pump fuel. Someone will not be harmed. A fuel must be pumped. This shall be done now. Now someone will pump fuel."

The air blasts kept up but the kid stopped writing. "It's just repeating 'Attention' again," he said.

The truck repeated its message again and again. I didn't like the look of the words printed on the napkin in block style. They looked machine-like, ruthless. There would be no compromise with those words. You did or you didn't.

"Well," the kid said, "what do we do?"

"Nothing," the trucker said. His face was excited and working. "All we have to do is wait. They must all be low on fuel. One of the little ones out back has already stopped. All we have to do . . ."

The air horn stopped. The truck backed up and joined its fellows. They waited in a semicircle, headlights pointed in towards us.

"There's a bulldozer out there," I said.

Jerry looked at me. "You think they'll rip the place down?"

"Yes."

He looked at the counterman. "They couldn't do that could they?"

The counterman shrugged.

"We oughta vote," the trucker said. "No backmail, damn it. All we gotta do is wait." He had repeated it three times now, like a charm.

"Okay," I said. "Vote!"

"Wait," the trucker said immediately.

I think we ought to fuel them. I said. We can wait for a better chance to get away. Counterman?

Stay in here, he said. You want to be their slaves? That's what it's come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin' oil filters every time one of those... things beats its horn? Not me. He looked darkly out the window. Let them starve.

I looked at the kid and the girl.

I think he's right, he said. That's the only way to stop them. If someone was going to rescue us, they would have God knows what's going on in other places. And the girl, with Snodgrass in her eyes, nodded and stepped closer to him.

That's it then, I said.

I went over to the cigarette machine and got a pack without looking at the brand. I'd stopped smoking a year ago, but this seemed like a good time to start again. The smoke rasped harshly in my lungs.

Twenty minutes crawled by. The trucks out front waited. In back, they were lining up at the pumps.

I think it was all a bluff, the trucker said. Just.

Then there was a louder, harsher, choppier note, the sound of an engine revving up and falling off, then revving up again. The bulldozer.

It glittered like a yellow jacket in the sun, a Caterpillar with clattering steel treads. Black smoke belched from its short stack as it wheeled around to face us.

It's going to charge, the trucker said. There was a look of utter surprise on his face. It's going to charge!

Get back, I said. Behind the counter!

The bulldozer was still revving. Gear shift levers moved themselves. Heat shimmer hung over its smoking stack. Suddenly the dozer blade lifted, a heavy steel curve dotted with dried dirt. Then, with a screaming howl of power, it roared straight at us.

The counter! I gave the trucker a shove, and that started them.

There was a small concrete verge between the parking lot and the grass. The dozer charged over it, blade lifting for a moment and then it rammed the front wall head on. Glass exploded inwards with a heavy coughing roar and the wood frame crashed into splinters. One of the overhead light globes fell, splashing more glass. Crockery fell from the shelves. The girl was screaming but the sound was almost lost beneath the steady, pounding roar of the Cat's engine.

It reversed, clanked across the chewed strip of lawn, and lunged forward again, sending the remaining booths crashing and spilling. The pie case fell off the counter, sending pie wedges skidding across the floor.

The counterman was crouching with his eyes shut, and the kid was hugging his girl. The trucker was wall-eyed with fear.

'We gotta stop it,' he gabbeted. 'Tell 'em we don't we'll do anything.'

'A little late, isn't it?'

The Cat reversed and got ready for another charge. New picks on its blade glittered in the sun. It lunged forward with a bellowing roar and this time it took down the main support to the left of what had been the window. That section of the roof fell in with a grinding crash. Plastic dust billowed up.

The dozer pulled free. Beyond it I could see the group of trucks, waiting.

I grabbed the counterman. 'Where are the oil drums?' The concrete pipes ran to butane gas, but I had seen vents for a warm-air furnace.

'Back of the storage room,' he said.

I grabbed the kid. 'Come on.'

We got up and ran into the storage room. The bulldozer hit again and the building trembled. Two or three more hits and I would be able to come right up to the counter for a cup of coffee.

There were two large fifty-gallon drums with feeds to the

furnace and turn spigots. There was a cart full of empty ketchup bottles near the back door. Get those Jerry.

What he did I pulled off my shirt and handed it to rags. The dozer hit again and again, and each hit was accompanied by the sound of more breakage.

I took four of the ketchup bottles from the spigots and he stuffed rags into them. You play tootha I? I asked him. 'In high school.'

Okay. Pretend you're going in from the five.

We went out into the restaurant. The whole front wall was open to the sky. Sprays of glass littered like diamonds. One heavy beam had fallen diagonally across the opening. The dozer was backing up to take it out and I thought that this time I would keep coming, tipping through the stools and then demolishing the counter itself.

We knelt down and thrust the bottles out. Light them up, I said to the trucker.

He got his matches out, but his hands were shaking too badly and he dropped them. The counterman picked them up, struck one, and the hunks of shirt blazed greedily alight.

'Quick,' I said.

We ran, the kid a little in the lead. Glass crunched and ground underfoot. There was a hot, oily smell in the air. Everything was very loud, very bright.

The dozer charged.

The kid dodged out under the beam and stood shielded in front of that heavy tempered steel blade. I went out to the right. The kid's first throw fell short. His second hit the blade and the flame splashed harmlessly.

He tried to turn and then it was on him, a rolling juggernaut, four tons of steel. His hands flew up and then he was gone, chewed under.

I bolted hooked around and lobbed one bottle into the open cab and the second right into the works. They exploded together in a leaping sheet of flame.

For a moment the dozer's engine rose in an almost human squeal of rage and pain. I, who'd been a maddened

hat circle, rippling out the left corner of the diner, and raced drunkenly toward the drainage ditch.

The steel trellis were streaked and dotted with gore and where the kid had been, here was something that looked like a crumpled towel.

The driver got a most to the ditch, flames boiling from under his cowling and from the cockpit, and then it exploded like a geyser.

I stumbled backward and almost fell over a pile of rubble. There was a hot screen that wasn't just red. It was burning hair. I was on fire.

I grabbed a tablecloth, jammed it on my head, ran behind the counter, and plunged my head into the silk hard enough to crack it in the bottom. The girl was screaming Jerry's name over and over in a shrieking insane larn.

I turned around and saw the huge car carrier slowly rolling towards the defenseless front of the diner.

The tracker screamed and broke for the side door.

Don't, the counterman cried. Don't do that.

But he was out and sprinting for the drainage ditch and the open field beyond.

The truck must have been standing sentry just out of sight of that side door, a small panel job with Wong's Cash and Carry Laundry written on the side. It ran him down almost before you could see it happen. Then it was gone and only the tracker was left, twisted onto the gravel. He had been knocked out of his shoes.

The car carrier rolled slowly over the concrete verge, on to the grass, over the kid's remains, and stopped with its huge snout plowing into the diner.

It was hit in the elbow, a sudden, shattering bang, followed by another, and another.

Stop! the girl whispered. Stop! stop! please!

But the bounces went on a long time. It took only a minute to pick up the pattern. It was the same as before. It wanted someone to feed it and the others.

I got, I said. Are the parties unhooked?

The counterman bowed. He had aged fifty years.

"No," the girl screamed. "She threw herself at me. You've got to stop them. Beat them, burn them, break them." Her voice wavered and became more harsh-bray, if grief and loss.

The counterman held her. I went around the corner of the counter, picking my way through the rubble, and cut through the supply room. My heart was thudding heavily when I stepped out into the warm sun. I wanted another cigarette, but you don't smoke around the stands.

The trucks were still lined up. The laundry truck was crouched across the gravel from me like a hound dog growling and rasping. A lorry moved and I would scream. The sun glinted in its blank windshield and I shuddered. It was like looking into the face of an idiot.

I switched the pump to on and pulled out the nozzle, answered the first gas cap and began to pump fuel.

It took me half an hour to pump the first tank dry and then I moved on to the second round. I was alternating between gas and diesel. Trucks marched by endlessly. I was beginning to understand now. I was beginning to see. People were doing this all over the country, if they were living, lead like the trucker knocked out of the trucks with heavy trademarks mashed across their guts.

The second tank was dry then and I went to the third. The sun was like a hammer and my head was starting to ache with the fumes. There were blisters in the soft webbing between thumb and index finger. But they wouldn't know about that. They would know about leaks manifolds and bad gaskets and frozen universal joints, but not about blisters or sunstroke or the need to scream. They needed to know only one thing about their late masters, and they knew it. We bleed.

The last tank was stuck dry and I threw the nozzle on the ground. So, if there were more trucks lined up around the corner, I twisted my head to relieve a crick in my neck and stared. The line went out of the truck parking lot and up the road and out of sight. Two and three lanes deep. It was

like a nightmare of the Los Angeles Freeway at rush hour  
The horizon shimmered and danced with their exhaust the  
air stank of carbonization

'No,' I said. 'Out of gas. All gone, fela.'

And there was a heavier rumble, a bass note that shook  
the teeth. A huge silvery truck was pulling up, a tanker.  
Written on the side was 'F. L. C. P. with Phillips 66. The  
Jetport Fuel'.

A heavy hose dropped out of the rear

I went over, took it, slipped up the feeder plate on the  
first tank and attached the hose. The truck began to pump.  
The stench of petroleum sank into me—the same stink that  
the dinosaurs must have died smelling as they went down  
into the tar pits. I hauled the other two tanks and then went  
back to work.

Consciousness twinkled away to a point where I lost  
track of time and trucks. I unscrewed, rammed the nozzle  
into the hose, pumped until the hot, heavy liquid splattered  
out, then repaced the cap. My busters broke, trickling pus  
down to my wrists. My head was pounding like a rotted  
tooth and my stomach rolled helplessly with the stench of  
hydrocarbons.

I was going to faint. I was going to faint and that would be  
the end of it. I would pump until I dropped.

Then there were hands on my shoulders, the dark hands  
of the counterman. 'Go on,' he said. 'Rest yourself. I'll take  
over till dark. Try to sleep.'

I handed him the pump.

But I can't sleep.

The girl is sleeping. She's sprawled over in the corner  
with her head on a table, both and her face won't unknit  
itself even in sleep. It's the timeless, ageless face of the  
warhag. I'm going to get her up pretty quick. It's twilight  
and the counterman has been out there for five hours.

Still, they keep coming. I look out through the wrecked  
window and their headlights stretch for a mile or better.

Waking the yellow sapphires in the growing darkness  
They must be hacked up all the way to the armpit, maybe  
further

The girl w I have to take her turn. I can show her how  
She I say she can't, but she will. She wants to live

*You want to be their slaves?* the counterman had said  
*That's what it's come to. You want to spend the rest of your  
life changin' oil filters every time one of these things bust its  
horn?*

We could run, maybe. It would be easy to make the  
drainage ditch now the way they're stacked up. Run  
through the houses through the marshy places where trucks  
were being born like mastodons and go

*back to the caves*

Drawing pictures in charcoal. This is the moon god. This  
is a tree. This is a Mack semi, overwhelming a hanter

Not even that. So much of the world is paved now. Even  
the playgrounds are paved. And for the fields and marshes  
and deep woods there are tanks, half tracks, flatbeds  
equipped with lasers, lasers, heat seeking radar. And  
little by little they can make it into the wet. I hear want

I can see great columns of trucks filling the Okefenokee  
Swamp with sand, the bulldozers rippin' through the  
natural parks and woodlands, grading the earth flat, stamping  
it into one great flat plain. And then the hot top tracks  
arriving

But they're machines. No matter what's happened to  
them, what mass consciousness we've given them, they  
can't reproduce. In fifty or sixty years they'll be rusting  
hollow with all the bone gone out of them, mossy carcasses  
for tree men to stone and spit at.

And if I close my eyes I can see the production ones in  
Dearborn and Dearborn and Youngstown and Mack, new  
tracks being put together by blue collar who no  
longer even punch a clock but only drop and are replaced.

The counterman is staggering a little now. He's about  
busted, too. I've got to wake the girl.

Two planes are leaving silver contrails etched across the  
darkening eastern horizon  
I wish I could believe there are people in them

## SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK

Jim Norman's wife had been waiting for him since two and when she saw the car pull up in front of their apartment building she came out to meet him. She had gone to the store and bought a celebration meal—a couple of steaks, a bottle of Lancer's, a head of lettuce, and Thousand Is' and dressing. Now, watching him get out of the car she found herself hoping with some desperation (and not for the first time that day) that there was going to be something to celebrate.

He came up the walk holding his new briefcase in one hand and four texts in the other. She could see the title of the top one *Introduction to Grammar*. She put her hands on his shoulder and asked, "How did it go?"

And he smiled.

But that night he had the old dream for the first time in a very long time and woke up sweating with a scream behind his lips.

His interview had been conducted by the principal of Harold Davis High School and the head of the English Department. The subject of his breakdown had come up. He had expected it would.

The principal, a bad and cadaverous man named Fenton, had leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Simmons, the English head, lit his pipe.

"I was under a great deal of pressure at the time," Jim

Norman said. His fingers wanted to twist about in his lap but he wouldn't let them.

"I think we understand that," Benton said, smiling. "And while we have no desire to pry, I'm sure we do agree that teaching is a pressure occupation, especially at the high school level. You're on stage five periods out of seven, and you're playing to the toughest audience in the world. That's why he brushed with some pride: teachers have more accrues than any other profession in a group with the exception of accountants and clerks."

Jim said, "The pressures involved in my breakdown were extreme."

Benton and Simmons nodded noncommittal encouragement, and Symmons clucked his lighter open to rekindle his pipe. Suddenly the office seemed very light, very close. Jim had the queer sensation that someone had just turned on a heat lamp over the back of his neck. His fingers were twisting in his lap, and he made them stop.

"I was in my senior year and practice teaching. My mother had died the summer before—cancer—and my last conversation with her, she asked me to go to grammar school. My brother, my older brother, died when we were both quite young. He had been planning to teach and she thought . . ."

"He could see from the eyes that he was wandering and thought, 'God, I'm making a bunch of this.'

"I did as she asked," he said, leaving the tangential relationship with his mother and his brother Wayne, poor, ill-fated Wayne—and himself behind. During the second week of my interim teaching, my hancree was involved in a hit-and-run accident. She was the hit part of it. Some kid in a hot rod—they never caught him.

Symmons made a soft noise of encouragement.

"I went to the hospital. There didn't seem to be any other course. She was in a great deal of pain—a badly broken leg and four fractured ribs—but no danger. I don't think I really knew the pressure I was under."

*Cortez now. That is where the ground I never走  
I'm a credit at Center Street Vocational Trades High. Jim  
and*

*Garden spot of the city. Fenton said. Switchblades  
motorcycle boots, zip guns in the lockers, such money's  
protection racket's, and every third kid selling dope to the  
other two. I know about Trades.*

*There was a kid named Mack Zimmerman. Jim said.  
Sensitive boy. Played the guitar. I had him in a compre-  
hension class and he had talent. I came in one morning and  
two boys were heading him while a third smashed his  
Yamaha guitar against the radiator. Zimmerman was  
screaming. I yelled for them to stop and give me the guitar.  
I started for them and someone yanked me. Jim shrugged.  
That was it. I had a breakdown. No screaming meemies  
or cruching in the corner. I just couldn't go back. When I  
got near Trades, my chest would tighten up. I couldn't  
breathe right. I got cold sweat.*

*That happens to me too. Fenton said amably.*

*I went into analysis. A community therapy deal. I  
couldn't afford a psychiatrist. It did me good. Sally and I  
are married. She has a slight limp and a scar, but otherwise  
good as new. He looked at them squarely. I guess you  
could say the same for me.*

*Fenton said. You actually finished your practice  
teaching requirement at Cortez High School. I believe.*

*That's no bed of roses either. Simmons said.*

*I wanted a hard school. Jim said. I swapped with  
another guy to get Cortez.*

*As from your supervisor and or the teacher. Fenton  
commented.*

*Yes.*

*And a half year average of 3.8K. Damn close to straight  
A's.*

*I enjoyed my college work.*

*Fenton and Simmons glanced at each other, then stood  
up. Jim got up.*

We'll be on through McNamee. Euston said. We'd have a few more appointments to interview.

"Yes, of course."

but speaking for myself, I'm impressed by your academic records and personal conduct.

It's nice of you to say so.

Now, perhaps Mr. Norman would like a coffee before he goes?

They shook hands.

In the hall, Sommerville said, I think you've got the job if you want it. That's off the record, of course.

I'm inclined. He had ~~checked~~ off the record himself.

David Hight was a building rock-ribbed housed a remarkable musical project—the Science Wing alone had been funded at \$3 million in last year's budget. The classrooms which still held the ghosts of the WPA workers who had built them and the postwar kids who had first used them were furnished with modern desks and white oak bookshelves. The students were clean, well-dressed, vivacious, efficient. Sixty-four seniors owned the town cars. All in all, a grand school. A fine school to teach in during the Sixties Seventies. It made Center Street's seasonal trades look like darkest Africa.

But after the kids were gone, something odd and brooding seemed to settle over the halls and whisper in the empty rooms. Some black, notorious beast, never quite in view. Some men, as he walked down the Wing 4 corridor to walk the parking lot with his new briefcase in one hand. Jim Norman thought he could almost hear it breathing.

He had the dream again near the end of October, and that time he did scream. He awoke this way, his racing heart thumped. Only sitting up in bed beside him, holding his shoulder. His heart was thudding heavily.

"God," he said, and scrubbed a hand across his face.  
"Are you all right?"

"Sure I yelled at Jim Lit."

But did you ~~h~~ug me?"

"Yes."

"Something from when those boys broke that fellow's guitar?"

"No," he said. "Much older than that. Sometimes it comes back that's all. No sweat."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Do you want a glass of milk?" Her eyes were dark with concern.

He kissed her shoulder. "No. Go to sleep."

She turned off the light and he lay there looking into the darkness.

He had a good schedule for the new teacher on the staff. Period one was free. Two and three were freshman comp. One group did one kind of fun. Period four was his best class: American Lit with college bound seniors who got a kick out of hashing the ole masters around for a period each day. Period five was a consultation period, when he was supposed to see students with personal or academic problems. There were very few who seemed to have either, or who wanted to discuss them with him, and he spent most of those periods with a good novel. Period six was a grammar course, dry as chalkdust.

Period seven was his only cross. The class was called Living with Literature, and it was held in a small box of a classroom on the third floor. The room was hot in the early fall and cold as the winter approached. The class itself was an elective for what school catalogues coyly call "the now learner."

There were twenty-seven now learners in Jim's class, most of them school jocks. The kindest thing you could accuse them of would be disinterest, and some of them had a streak of outright malevolence. He walked in one day to find an obscene and cruelly accurate caricature of himself

up the board with Mr. Norman unnecessarily choked under. He wiped it off without comment and proceeded with the lesson in spite of the snickers.

He worked up interesting lesson plans, included as materials, and ordered several high-interest, high-comprehension texts, all the novel. The classroom mood vacated between giddy beauty and sublimity. Early in November, a high-break-out between two boys during a discussion of *Mr. Mao and Mrs. Jim* broke it up and sent both boys to the office. When he opened his book to where he had left off, the words *Rebel* glared up at him.

He took the problem to Summons: *See this is who shags and it has pipe. I don't have any real solution. Jim last period is always a bitch. And, or some of them, a D grade in your class means no more toothball or basketball. And they've had the other gits English courses so they're stuck with me.*

*And me too.* Jim said grimly.

Summons nodded. *Show them you mean business and they'll buckle down. I try to keep the experts aghast.*

But period seven remained a constant thorn in his side. One of the biggest problems in *Living with It* was a huge, slow moving mouse named Chip O'way. In early December, during the brief hiatus between football and basketball, O'way played both. Jim caught him with a cloth sheet and ran him out of the classroom.

*It's no funk me we get you you son of a bitch!* O'way yelled down the dimly lit floor corridor. *You hear me?*

*Given. I'm sorry. Don't waste your breath.*

*We get you are pu.*

Jim went back into the classroom. They looked up at him blankly, faces betraying nothing. He let a surge of unreason like the feeling that had washed over him before, before

*We'll get you creeps.*

He took his gentle hand out of his desk, opened it to the page titled *Living with Literature*, and carefully lettered another exam slot next to Chip O'way's name.

That night he had the dream again.

The dream was always cruel & slow. There was a me to see and see everything. And there was the added horror of reliving events that were moving towards a known conclusion, as he plopped as a man strapped into a cargo plane over a cliff.

In the dream he was nine and his brother Wayne was twelve. They were going down Broad Street in Stratford, Connecticut, bound for the Stratford Library. Jim's books were two days overdue, and he had knocked four cents from the cupboard bowl to pay the fine. It was summer vacation. You could smell the freshly cut grass. You could hear a bat game floating out of some second floor apartment window. Yankees leading the Red Sox six to nothing in the top of the eighth. Ted Williams batting, and you could see the shadows from the Barretts Bounding Company slow's lengthening across the street as the evening turned slowly towards dark.

Beyond Teddy's Market and Barretts, there was a tall road overpass, and on the other side, a number of the local losers hanging around a closed gas station. Five or six boys in leather jackets and pegged pants. Jim hated to go by them. They rolled out their four eyes and their shrills and their you get an extra quarter and once they chased them half a block. But Wayne would not take the long way around. That would be chicken.

In the dream, the eye passed around above a net, and you began to feel dread straggling in your throat, like a big black bird. You saw everything, the Barretts neon sign just starting to flutter on and off, the flakes of rust on the green overpass, the glitter of broken glass in the unders of the railroad bed, a broken bike lying in the gutter.

You try to tell Wayne you've been through this before, a hundred times. The local losers aren't hanging around the gas stat in this time, they're hidden in the shadows under the trees. But it won't come out. You're helpless.

Then you're underneath, and some of the shadows de-

latch themselves from the walls and a tall kid with a blond crew cut and a broken nose pushes Wayne up against the smoky cinder blocks and says *'Give us some money'*

*'Let me alone'*

You try to run but a fat guy with greasy black hair grabs you and throws you against the wall next to your brother. His left eye is fluttering up and down nervously and he says *'Come on kid how much you got'*

*'F-four cents'*

*'You fuckin' bar'*

Wayne tries to twist free and a guy with odd orange-coloured hair he pushes the blond one to hold him. The guy with the jittery eyes suddenly bashes you one in the mouth. You feel a sudden heaviness in your groin and a dark patch appears on your jeans

*'Look Kinne he we himself'*

Wayne's struggles become frenzied and he almost - not quite - gets free. Another guy wearing black chinos and a white T-shirt throws him back. There is a small strawberry birthmark on his chin. The stone throat of the overpass is beginning to tremble. The metal girders pick up a thumping vibration. Train coming

Some one strikes the books out of your hands and the kid with the birthmark on his chin kicks them into the gutter. Wayne suddenly kicks out with his right foot and it connects with the crotch of the kid with the jittery face. He screams

*'Kinne he's gettin' away'*

The kid with the jittery face is screaming about his nuts but even his howls are lost in the gathering shaking roar of the approaching train. Then it is over them and its noise fills the world

Light flashes on switchblades. The kid with the blond crew cut is holding one up. Birthmark has the other. You can't hear Wayne but his words are in the shape of his lips

*'Run Jimmy Run'*

You slip at your knees and the hands holding you are

gone and you skitter between a pair of legs like a frog. A hand slaps down on your back, groping for purchase, and gets none. Then you are running back the way you came, with a lot of the horrific, sludgy slowness of dreams. You look back over your shoulder and see -

He woke in the dark. Sally sleeping peacefully beside him. He bit back the scream and when I was throttled, he fell back.

When he had looked back, back into the yawning darkness of the overpass, he had seen the blond kid and the birthmarked kid drive their knives into his brother. Blonnie's below the breast bone and Birthmark's directly into his brother's groin.

He lay in the darkness breathing harshly, waiting for that nine-year-old ghost to depart, waiting for honest sleep to blot it all away.

An unknown time later, it did.

The Christmas vacation and semester break were combined in the city's school district, and the holiday was almost a month long. The dream came twice, early on and did not come again. He and Sally went to visit her sister in Vermont and skied a great deal. They were happy.

Jim's living with Lili problem seemed inconsequential and a little foolish in the open, crystalline air. He went back to school with a winter tan, feeling cool and collected.

Simmons caught him on the way to his period two class and handed him a folder. 'New student, period seven. Name is Robert Lawson Transfer.'

'Hey, I've got twenty-seven in there right now. Sim, I'm overloaded.'

'You've got twenty-seven. Bill Stearns got killed the Tuesday after Christmas. Car accident. Hit and run.'

'Buddy?'

The picture formed in his mind in black and white, like a senior photograph. William Stearns. Key Club 1. Football

12 Pen & Lance 2 He had been one of the few good ones in Living with Lit. Quiet, consistent A's and B's on his exams. Didn't volunteer often, but usually summoned the correct answers (laced with a pleasing dry wit) when called on. Dead. Fifteen years old. It's own mortality suddenly whispered through his bones, like a cold draught under a door.

Christ that's awful. Do they know what happened?

Cops are checking into it. He was downtown exchanging a Christmas present. Started across Rampart Street and an old Ford screeched him. No one got the license number, but the words "Snake Eyes" were written on the side door the way a kid would do it.

Christ, I'm sad again.

There's the bell. Simmons said.

He hurried away, pausing to break up a crowd of kids around a drinking fountain. Jim went towards his class, feeling empty.

During his free period he flipped open Robert Lawson's file. The first page was a green sheet from McTire High which Jim had never heard of. The second was a student personality profile. A 1 listed IQ of 78. Some mandatory tests, not many. Anti-social answers to the Barnett-Bradwin personality test. Poor aptitude scores. Jim thought sourly that he was a Living with Lit kid all the way.

The next page was a disciplinary history, the yellow sheet. The McTire sheet was white with a black border and it was depressingly well-filled. Lawson had been in a hundred kinds of trouble.

He turned the next page, glanced down at a school photo of Robert Lawson, then looked again. Terror suddenly crept into the pit of his belly and coiled there, warm and hissing.

Lawson was staring at the camera, not directly at the camera, as if posing for a police mug shot rather than a school photographer. There was a small strawberry birthmark on his chin.

By period seven he had brought all the civilized rationalizations into play. He told himself there must be thousands of kids with red birthmarks on their chins. He told himself that the hood who had stabbed his brother that day sixteen long dead years ago would now be at least thirty-two.

But, climbing to the third floor the apprehension remained. And another fear to go with it. *This is how you feel when you were cracking up.* He tasted the bright steel of panic in his mouth.

The usual group of kids was horsing around the door of Room 33 and some of them went in when they saw Jim coming. A few hung around talking in undertones and grinning. He saw the new boy standing beside Chip Osway. Robert Lawson was wearing blue jeans and heavy yellow tractor boots all the rage this year.

'Chip, go on in.'

'That an order?' He smiled vacuous over Jim's head.  
'Sure.'

'You flunk me on that test?'

'Sure.'

'Yeah, that's.' The rest was an under-the-breath mumble.

Jim turned to Robert Lawson. You're new, he said. I just wanted to tell you how we run things around here.

'Sure, Mr. Norman.' His right eyebrow was split with a small scar, a scar Jim knew. There could be no mistake. It was crazy, it was lunacy, but it was a so a fact. Sixteen years ago this kid had driven a knife into his brother.

Numbly, as if from a great distance he heard himself beginning to outline the class rules and regulations. Robert Lawson hooked his thumbs into his garrison belt. Listened, smiled, and began to nod, as if they were old friends.

'Jim?'

'Hmmm?'

'Is something wrong?'

No'

Those living with lot boys still giving you a hard time?"

No answer

'Jim?

No'

Why don't you go to bed early tonight?"

But he didn't

The dream was very bad that night. When the kid with the strawberry birthmark stashed his brother with his knife he called after Jim. You next kid. Right through the bag. He woke up screaming.

He was teaching *Lord of the Flies* that week, and talking about symbolism when Lawson raised his hand.

Robert? he said evenly.

Why do you keep starin' at me? Jim blinked and felt his mouth go dry.

You see somethin' green? Or is my fly unzipped?"

A nervous titter from the class.

Jim replied evenly. I wasn't staring at you. Mr Lawson. Can you tell us why Ralph and Jack disagreed over

'You were starin' at me.'

Do you want to talk about it with Mr Fenton?

Lawson appeared to think it over. Now.

Good. Now can you tell us why Ralph and Jack

I didn't read it. I think it's a dumb book.

Jim snorted tightly. Do you now? You want to remember that while you're judging the book, the book is also judging you. Now can anyone else tell me why they disagreed over the existence of the beast?

Kathy Stavin raised her hand timidly, and Lawson gave her a cynical once over and said something to Chip Osway. The words leaving his lips looked like nice tits. Chip nodded.

Kathy?"

Isn't it because Jack wanted to hunt the beast?

Good. He turned and began to write on the board. At the instant his back was turned a grapefruit smashed against the board beside his head.

He jerked backward and wheeled around. Some class members laughed, but Osway and Lawson only looked at Jim innocently.

I'm stooped and picked up the grapefruit. Someone, he said, looking towards the back of the room, ought to have this rammed down his goddamn throat.

Kathy Slavin gasped.

He tossed the grapefruit in the wastebasket and turned back to the blackboard.

He opened the morning paper, sipping his coffee, and saw the headline about halfway down. 'God,' he said, spitting his wife's easy flow of morning chatter. His belly felt suddenly filled with splinters -

'Teen-Age Girl Falls to Her Death' Katherine Slavin, a seventeen-year-old junior at Harold Davis High School, either fell or was pushed from the roof of her downtown apartment house early yesterday evening. The girl, who kept a pigeon coop on the roof, had gone up with a sack of feed according to her mother.

Police said an unidentified woman in a neighbouring development had seen three boys running across the roof at 6:45 p.m. just minutes after the girl's body (continued page 3) -

Jim, was she one of yours?

But he could only look at her mutely.

Two weeks later Simmons met him in the hall after the lunch bell with a folder in his hand, and Jim felt a terrible sinking in his belly.

New student, he said flatly to Simmons. 'Living with Li.

Sim's eyebrows went up. 'How did you know that?

Jim shrugged and held his hand out for the folder.  
'Got to run,' Simmons said. 'Department heads are meeting on course evaluations. You look all the run-down.  
Feeling okay?'

*That's right, a little run-down. Like Bally Stearns.*

'Sure,' he said.

'That's the stuff,' Simmons said, and clapped him on the back.

When he was gone, Jim opened the folder to the picture, wincing in advance. Like man about to be hit.

But the face wasn't instantly familiar. Just a kid's face. Maybe he'd seen it before, maybe not. The kid, David Garcia, was a hulking, dark-haired boy with rather negroid lips and dark, slumbering eyes. The yellow sheet said he was also from Morford High and that he had spent two years in Granby Le Reformatory. For theft.

Jim closed the folder with hands that trembled slightly.

'Sally?'

She looked up from her ironing. He had been staring at a TV basketball game without really seeing it.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Forgot what I was going to say.'

'Must have been a lie.'

He smiled mechanically and looked at the TV again. It had been on the tip of his tongue to spill everything. But how could he? It was worse than crazy. Where would you start? The dream? The breakdown? The appearance of Robert Lawson?

*No. With Wayne, your brother.*

But he had never told anyone about that, not even in analysis. His thoughts turned to David Garcia, and the dreamy terror that had washed over him when they had looked at each other in the hall. Of course, he had only looked vaguely familiar in the picture. Pictures don't move or twitch.

Garcia had been standing with Lawson and Chip Osway, and when he looked up and saw Jim Norman, he struck and

his eyelid began to jitter up and down and voices spoke in Jim's mind with unearthly clarity

*Come on, kid, how much you got?*

*F four cents*

*You fuckin' liar, look Vinnie, he wer himself!*

*Jim? Did you say something?*

No. But he wasn't sure if he had or not. He was getting very scared.

One day after school in early February there was a knock on the teachers'-room door and when Jim opened it, Chip Osway stood there. He looked frightened. Jim was alone. It was ten after four and the last of the teachers had gone home an hour before. He was correcting a batch of American Lit themes.

'Chip?' he said evenly.

Chip shuffled his feet. 'Can I talk to you for a minute, Mr Norman?'

'Sure. But if it's about that test, you're wasting your time.'

'It's not about that. Uh... can I smoke in here?'

'Go ahead.'

He lit his cigarette with a hand that trembled slightly. He didn't speak for perhaps as long as a minute. It seemed that he couldn't. His lips twitched, his hands came together and his eyes shifted, as if some inner self was struggling to find expression.

'He suddenly burst out. If they do it, I want you to know I wasn't in on it! I don't like those guys. They're creeps.'

'What guys, Chip?'

'Lawson and that Garcia creep.'

'Are they planning to get me?' The old dreamy terror was on him and he knew the answer.

'I liked them at first,' Chip said. 'We went out and had a few beers. I started bitchin' about you and that test. About how I was gonna get you. But that was just talk! I swear it!'

'What happened?'

They took me right up on it. Asked what time you left school, what kind of car you drove, all that stuff. I said what have you got against him and Garcia said they knew you a long time ago — hey, are you all right?

The cigarette, he said thickly. Haven't ever got used to the smoke.'

Chip ground it out. I asked them when they knew you and Bob Lawson said I was still pissin' my d\*ies then. But they're seventeen, the same as me.

'Then what?'

'Well, Garcia leans over the table and says you can't want to get him very bad. If you don't even know when he leaves the fuckin' school. What was ya gonna do? So I says I was gonna matchstick your tyres and leave you with four flats. He looked at Jim with pleading eyes. I wasn't even gonna do that, I said. I because

You were scared. Jim asked quietly.

Yeah, and I'm still scared.

What did they think of your idea?

Chip shuddered. Bob Lawson says, is that what you was gonna do, you cheap prick? And I said, tryin' to be tough, what was you gonna do, off him? And Garcia — his eyelids starts to go up and down — he takes something out of his pocket and clicked it open and it's a switchknife. That's when I took off.

When was this, Chip?

Yesterday. I'm scared to sit with those guys now. Mr Norman.'

Okay, I'm said. Okay. He looked down at the papers he had been correcting without seeing them.

What are you going to do?

I don't know, I'm said. I really don't.

On Monday morning he still didn't know. His first thought had been to tell Sally everything, starting with his brother's murder sixteen years ago. But it was impossible. She would be sympathetic but frightened and unbelieving.

Simmons? Also impossible. Simmons would think he was mad. And maybe he was. A man in a group art center session he had attended had said having a breakdown was like breaking a vase and then gluing it back together. You could never trust yourself to handle that vase again than surely. You could. In fact put a flower in it because flowers need water and water might dissolve the glue.

*Am I crazy, then?*

If he was, Chip Osway was, too. That thought came to him as he was getting into his car and a bolt of excitement went through him.

Of course, Lawson and Garcia had threatened him in Chip Osway's presence. That might not stand up in court but it would get the two of them suspended. He could get Chip to repeat his story in Fenton's office. And he was a most sure he could get Chip to do that. Chip had his own reasons for wanting them far away.

He was driving into the parking lot when he thought about what had happened to Billy Stearns and Katy Stay n.

During his free period, he went up to the office and leaned over the registration secretary's desk. She was doing the absence list.

Chip Osway here today? he asked casually.

Chip? She looked at him doubtfully.

Charles Osway. I'm amended. Chip's a nickname.

She leafed through a pile of slips, glanced at one and pulled it out. He's absent. Mr. Norman.

Can you get me his phone number?

She pushed her pencil into her hair and said. Certainly. She dug it out of the file and handed it to him. Jim dialed the number in an office phone.

The phone rang a dozen times and he was about to hang up when a rough, sleep-blotted voice said. Yeah?

'Mr. Osway?'

Harry Osway's been dead six years. I'm Gary Denker.'

Are you Chip Osway's stepfather?

'What'd he do?'

'Pardon?'

'He's run off. I want to know what he did.'

'So far as I know, nothing. I just wanted to talk with him. Do you have any idea where he might be?'

'Now, I work nights. I don't know none of his friends.'

'Any idea at all?'

'Nope. He took the old suitcase and fifty bucks he saved up from stealing car parts or selling dope or whatever these kids do for money. Gode to San Francisco to be a hippie for all I know.'

'If you hear from him, will you call me at school? Jim Norman, English wing.'

'Sure will.'

Jim put the phone down. The registration secretary looked up and offered a quick, meaningless smile. Jim didn't smile back.

Two days later, the words 'left school' appeared after Chip Osway's name on the morning attendance slip. Jim began to wait for Simmons to show up with a new folder. A week later he did.

He looked dully down at the picture. No question about this one. The crew cut had been replaced by long hair, but it was still blond. And the face was the same. Vincent Corey. Vinnie to his friends and intimates. He stared up at Jim from the picture, an insolent grin on his lips.

When he approached his period-seven class, his heart was thudding gravely in his chest. Lawson and Garcia and Vinnie Corey were standing by the bulletin board outside the door. They all straightened when he came towards them.

Vinnie smiled his insouciant smile, but his eyes were as cold and dead as ice floes. You must be Mr. Norman. H. Norm.

Lawson and Garcia littered.

I'm Mr. Norman, Jim said, ignoring the hand that Vinnie had put out. You'll remember that?

‘Sure I’ll remember it. How’s your brother?’

Jim froze. He felt his bladder loosen, and as if from far away from down a long corridor somewhere in his cranium he heard a ghostly voice. *Look, I know he was himself.*

‘What do you know about my brother?’ he asked thickly.

‘Nothing.’ A voice said. ‘Nothing much.’ They stared at him with their empty dangerous stares.

The bell rang and they sauntered inside.

Drugstore phone booth, ten o’clock that night.

‘Operator, I want to call the police station in Stratford, Connecticut. No, I don’t know the number.’

*Clickings on the line. Conferences.*

The policeman had been Mr Nell. In those days he had been white-haired, perhaps in his mid-thirties. Hard to tell when you were just a kid. Their father was dead, and somehow Mr Nell had known that.

*Cat me Mr Nell boys.*

Jim and his brother met at lunchtime every day and they went into the Stratford Diner to eat the big sandwiches. Mom gave them each a nickel to buy milk - that was before school milk programmes started. And sometimes Mr Nell would come in, his leather belt creaking with the weight of his belt and his 38 revolver, and buy them each a pie à la mode.

*Where were you when they stabbed my brother, Mr Nell?*

A connection was made. The phone rang once.

‘Stratford Police.’

‘Hello. My name is James Norman. Officer. I’m calling long-distance. He named the city. I want to know if you can give me a line on a man who would have been on the force around 1957?’

He did the line a moment. Mr Norman.

A pause, then a new voice.

‘I’m Sergeant Morton Livingston, Mr Norman. Who are you trying to locate?’

Well Jim said as kids just called him Mr Nel. Does that

He says Don Norman now. He's seventy three or four.

Does he still live in Stratford?

Yes over on Barnum Avenue. Would you like the address?

And the phone number if you have it.

Okay. Did you know Don?

He used to buy my brother and me apple pie à la mode down at the Stratford Diner.

Christ that's been gone ten years. Wait a minute. He came back on the phone and read an address and a phone number. Jim jotted them down, thanked Livingston, and hung up.

He dialed again, gave the number, and waited. When the phone began to ring, a sudden hot tension hit him and he leaned forward, turning instinctively away from the drugstore soda fountain as though there was no one there but a plump teen-age girl reading a magazine.

The phone was picked up and a rich, masculine voice sounding not at all old, said, Hello? That single word set off a dusty chain reaction of memories and emotions, as startling as the Pavlovian reaction that can be set off by hearing an old record on the radio.

Mr Nel. Donald Nel?

Yes.

My name is James Norman. Mr Nel. Do you remember me, by any chance?

Yes, the voice responded immediately. Pie à la mode. Your brother was killed. KILLED. A shame. He was a lovely boy.

Jim collapsed against one of the booth's glass walls. The tension's sudden departure left him as weak as a statted toy. He found himself on the verge of spilling everything and he bit the urge back desperately.

Mr Nel, those boys were never caught.

No Nell said. We did have suspects. As I recall we had a line up at a Bridgeport police station.

Were those suspects identified to me by name?

No The procedure at a police show up was to address the participants by number. What's your interest in this now Mr Norman?

Let me throw some names at you Jim said. I want to know if they rang a bell in connection with the case.

'Son, I wouldn't.'

You might Jim said beginning to see a trifle desperate. Robert Lawson David Garcia Vincent Corey Do any of those?

Corey' Mr Nell said flatly. I remember him. Vinnie the Viper. Yes we had him up on that. His mother alibied him. I don't get anything from Robert Lawson. That could be anyone's name. But Garcia that rings a bell. I'm not sure why. Hell I'm old. He sounded disgusted.

Mr Nell is there any way you could check on those boys?

Well of course they wouldn't be boys any more.

Oh, yeah?

Listen Jimmy. Has one of those boys popped up and started harassing you?

I don't know. Some strange things have been happening. Things connected with the stabbing of my brother?

What things?

Mr Nell. I can't tell you. You'd think I was crazy.

His reply quick firm interested. Are you?

Jim paused. No, he said.

Okay. I can check the names through Stratford R&J. Where can I get in touch?

Jim gave his home number. You'd be most likely to catch me on Tuesday night. He was in almost every night but on Tuesday evenings Sally went to her pottery class.

What are you doing these days Jimmy?

Teaching school.

Good. This might take a few days, you know. I'm retired now.'

You sound just the same

Ali, but if you could see me! He chuckled. Do you still like a good piece of pie à la mode, Jimmy?

Sure, I'm said. I was a lie. He hated pie à la mode.

'I'm glad to hear that. Well, if there's nothing else, I'll

There is one more thing. Is there a Milford High in Stratford?'

'Not that I know of.'

'That's what I --'

Only thing name of Milford around here is Milford Cemetery out on the Ash Heights Road. And no one ever graduated from there. He chuckled dryly, and told Jim it sounded like the sudden rattle of bones in a pit.

Thank you, he heard himself saying. Goodbye.

Mr. Neil was gone. The operator asked him to deposit sixty cents, and he put it in automatically. He turned and stared into a horrid, squashed face plastered up against the glass, framed in two spread hands, the splayed fingers flattened white against the glass, as was the top of the nose.

It was Minnie, grinning at him.

Jim screamed.

Class again.

Living with Lit was doing a composition, and most of them were bent sweatily over their papers, putting their thoughts grimly down on the page, as if chopping wood. All but three. Robert Lawson, sitting in Bly Stearn's seat, David Garcia in Kathy Slavin's, Vinnie Corey in Chip O'way's. They sat with the blank papers in front of them, watching him.

A moment before the bell, Jim said softly, I want to talk to you for a minute after class, Mr. Corey.

'Sure, Norm.'

Lawson and Garcia tutted noisily, but the rest of the class did not. When the bell rang, they passed in their

papers and faintly bolted through the door. Lawson and Garcia lingered and Jim felt his belly tighten.

*Is it going to be now?*

Then Lawson nodded at Vinnie. See you later.  
Yeah.'

They left. Lawson closed the door and from behind the frosted glass, David Garcia suddenly yelled hoarsely. *Norm eats it!* Vinnie looked at the door, then back at Jim. He smiled.

He said, I was wondering if you'd ever get down to it.  
Really?' Jim said.

Scared you the other night in the phone booth, right dad?'

No one says dad any more, Vinnie. It's not cool. Like cool's not cool. It's as dead as Buddy Holly.

I talk the way I want, Vinnie said.

Where's the other one? The guy with the funny red hair.

Split man. But under his studied unconcern, I sensed a wariness.

He's alive, isn't he? That's why he's not here. He's alive and he's thirty two or three, the way you would be if.

Breach was always a drag. He's nothing. Vinnie sat up behind his desk and put his hands down flat on the cold graffiti. His eyes glittered. Man, I remember you at that lineup. You looked ready to piss your little old corduroy pants. I seen you lookin' at me and Davie. I put the hex on you.

I suppose you did, Jim said. You gave me sixteen years of bad dreams. Wasn't that enough? Why now? Why me?

Vinnie looked puzzled and then smiled again. Because you're unfinished business, man. You got to be cleaned up.

Where were you? Jim asked. Before

Vinnie's lips thinned. We ain't talkin' about that, Dog?

They dug you a hole, didn't they? Vinnie? Six feet deep. Right in the Miford Cemetery. Six feet at

*You shut up!*

He was on his feet. The desk fell over in the aisle  
It's not going to be easy, Jim said. 'I'm not going to  
make it easy for you.'

'We're gonna kill you, dad. You'll find out about that  
hole.'

'Get out of here.'

'Maybe that little wifey of yours, too.'

'You goddamn punk, if you touch her.' He started  
forward blindly, feeling violated and terrified by the men-  
tion of Sally.

Vinnie grinned and started for the door. Just be coo-  
Coo as a fool. He tittered.

'If you touch my wife I'll kill you.'

Vinnie's grin widened. Kill me? Man, I thought you  
knew I'm already dead.

He left. His footfalls echoed in the corridor for a long  
time.

'What are you reading, hon?'

Jim held the binding of the book, *Raising Demons* out  
for her to read.

'Yuck.' She turned back to the mirror to check her  
hair.

'Will you take a taxi home?' he asked.

'It's only four blocks. Besides, the walk is good for my  
figure.'

'Someone grabbed one of my girls over on Summer  
Street,' he lied. She thinks the object was rape.'

'Really? Who?'

'Dianna Snow,' he said, making a name up at random.  
'She's a cyclo-headed girl. Treat yourself to a taxi, okay?'

'Okay,' she said. She stopped at his chair, knelt, put her  
hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes. 'What's the  
matter, Jim?'

'Nothing.'

'Yes. Something is.'

'Nothing I can't handle.'

'Is it something about your brother?'

A draught of terror blew over him as if an inner door had been opened. 'Why do you say that?'

'You were moaning his name in your sleep last night Wayne Wayne you were saying Run, Wayne'

'It's nothing.'

'But it wasn't. They both knew it. He wanted her go'

'Mr Nell called quarter past eight. You don't have to worry about those guys,' he said. 'They're all dead.'

'Is that so?' He was holding his place in *Raising Dentons* with his index finger as he talked.

'Car smash. Six months after your brother was killed. A cop was chasing them. Frank Simon was the cop, as a matter of fact. He works out at Sikorsky now. Probably makes a lot more money.'

'And they crashed?'

'The car left the road at more than a hundred miles an hour and hit a main power pole. When they finally got the power shut off and scraped them out, they were cooked medium rare.'

Jim closed his eyes. 'You saw the report?'

'Looked at it myself.'

'Anything on the car?'

'It was a hot rod.'

'Any description?'

'Black 1954 Ford sedan with "Snake Eyes" written on the side. Fitting enough. They really crapped out.'

'They had a sidekick, Mr Nell. I don't know his name, but his nickname was Bleach.'

'That would be Charlie Sponder,' Mr Nell said without hesitation. 'He bleached his hair with Clorox one time. I remember that. It went streaky-white, and he tried to dye it back. The streaks went orange.'

'Do you know what he's doing now?'

'Career army man. Joined up in fifty-eight or nine, after he got a local girl pregnant.'

'Could I get in touch with him?'

It's mother lives in Stratford. She'd know.  
Can you give me her address?

I won't. Jim says. Not until you tell me what's eating you.

I can't. Mr Neil. You'd think I was crazy.

Try me.

I can't.

'All right, son.'

With you. But the line was dead.

You bastard. Jim said, and put the phone in the cradle. It rang under his hand and he jerked away from it as if it had suddenly burned him. He looked at it, breathing heavily. It rang three times, four. He picked it up. Listened. Closed his eyes.

A cop picked him up on his way to the hospital, then went ahead of him, siren screaming. There was a young doctor with a toothbrush moustache in the emergency room. He looked at Jim with dark, emotionless eyes.

Excuse me. I'm James Norman and...

I'm sorry. Mr Norman. She died at 9:04 p.m.

He was going to faint. The world went far away and swirled, and there was a high buzzing in his ears. His eyes wandered without purpose, seeing green-tiled walls, a wheeled stretcher glittering under the overhead florescents, a nurse with her cap askew. I need to freshen up, he says. An orderly was leaning against the wall outside Emergency Room No. 1. Wearing dirty whites with a few steps of drying blood spattered across the front. Cleaning his fingernails with a knife. The orderly looked up and grinned into Jim's eyes. The orderly was David Crane.

Jim fainted.

Funeral. Like a dance in three acts. The house. The funeral parlor. The graveyard. Faces coming out of nowhere, whirling close, whirling off into the darkness again. Sally's mother, her eyes streaming tears behind a black veil. Her father, looking shocked and old. Simmons. Others. They

ntroduced themselves and shook his hand. He nodded, not remembering their names. Some of the women brought flowers and one lady brought an apple pie and someone ate a piece and when he went out in the kitchen he saw it sitting on the counter, cut wide open and drowning slices into the pie plate like amber blood and he thought *Should have a big scoop of vanilla ice cream right on top*

He felt his hands and legs trembling, wanting to go across to the counter and throw the pie against the wall.

And then they were gone and he was watching himself the way you watch yourself in a home movie as he shook hands and nodded and said *Thank you* Yes I will *Thank you* I'm sure she is *Thank you*

When they were gone the house was his again. He went over to the mantel. It was cluttered with souvenirs of their marriage. A stuffed dog with jeweled eyes that she had won at Coney Island on their honeymoon. Two leather wallets - his diploma from B.U. and hers from U. Mass. A giant pair of styrofoam dice she had given him as a gag after he had dropped a sixteen dollars in Pinky Silverstein's poker game a year or so before. A thin china cup she had bought in a Coney Island junk shop last year. In the middle of the mantel their wedding picture. He turned it over and then sat down in his chair and looked at the blank TV set. A tear began to form behind his eyes.

An hour later the phone rang, jolting him out of a light doze. He groped for it.

"You're next, Norm."

"Vinnie?"

Man, she was like one of those clay pigeons in a shooting gallery. Wham and splatter.

"I'll be at the school tonight. Vinnie. Room 33. I'll leave the lights off. It's like just like the overpass that day. I think I can even pronounce the train."

"Just want to end it all, is that right?"

"That's right," Jim said. "You be here."

Maybe '

You like there I'm said and hung up

It was almost dark when he got to the school. He parked in his usual slot, opened the back door with his pass-key and went first to the English Department office on the second floor. He let himself in, opened the record cabinet and began to flip through the records. He paused about halfway through the stack and took out one called *Hi-Fi Sound Effects*. He turned it over. The third cut on the A side was Freight Train 3-4. He put the album on top of the department's portable stereo and took *Raising Demons* out of his overcoat pocket. He turned to a marked passage, read something, and nodded. He turned out the lights.

### Room 33

He set up the stereo system, stretching the speakers to their widest separation, and then put on the freight-train cut. The sound came swelling up out of nothing until it filled the whole room with the harsh clash of diesel engines and steel on steel.

With his eyes closed, he could almost believe he was under the Broad Street trestle, driven to his knees, watching as the savage little drama worked to its inevitable conclusion.

He opened his eyes, rejected the record, then reset it. He sat behind his desk and opened *Raising Demons* to a chapter entitled *Majestic Spirits and How to Call Them*. His lips moved as he read, and he paused at intervals to take objects out of his pocket and lay them on his desk.

First, an old and creased Kodak of him and his brother standing on the lawn in front of the Broad Street apartment house where they had lived. They both had identical crew cuts, and both of them were smiling shyly into the camera. Second, a small bottle of blood. He had caught a stray alley cat and slit its throat with his pocketknife. Third, the pocketknife itself. Last, a sweatband ripped from the an-

of an old Little League baseball cap. Wayne's cap. Jim had kept it in secret hopes that some day he and Sally would have a son to wear it.

He got up went to the window looked out. The parking lot was empty.

He began to push the school desks towards the walls, leaving a rough circle in the middle of the room. When that was done he got chalk from his desk drawer and following the diagram in the book exactly and using a yardstick he drew a pentagram on the floor.

His breath was coming harder now. He turned off the lights gathered his objects in one hand and began to recite.

Dark Father hear me for my soul's sake. I am one who promises sacrifice. I am one who begs a dark boon for sacrifice. I am one who seeks vengeance of the left hand. I bring blood in promise of sacrifice.

He screwed the cap off the jar which had originally held peanut butter and splashed it within the pentagram.

Something happened in the darkened school room. It was not possible to say exactly what but the air became heavier. There was a thickness in it that seemed to fill the throat and the belly with grey steel. The deep silence grew swelled with something unseen.

He did as the old rites instructed.

Now there was a feeling in the air that reminded Jim of the time he had taken a class to visit a huge power station. a feeling that the very air was crammed with electric potential and was vibrating. And then a voice curiously low and unpleasant spoke to him.

What do you require?

He could not tell if he was actually hearing it or only thinking but he did. He spoke two sentences.

It is a small boon. What do you offer?

Jim spoke two words.

Both the voice whispered. Right and left. Agreed?

Yes.

'Then give me what is mine'

He opened his pocketknife turned to his desk and his right hand down flat and hacked off his right index finger with four hard chops. Blood flew across the latter in dark patterns. It didn't hurt at all. He brushed the finger aside and switched the pocketknife to his right hand. Cutting off the left finger was harder. His range hand felt awkward and alien with the missing finger and the knife kept slipping. At last with an impatient grunt he threw the knife away snapped the bone and ripped the finger free. He picked them both up like breadsticks and threw them into the pentagram. There was a bright flash of light like an old-fashioned photographer's flashpowder. No smoke he noted. No smell of brimstone.

'What objects have you brought?'

'A photograph. A hand of cloth that has been dipped in his sweat.'

'Sweat is precious' the voice remarked and there was a cold greed in the tone that made Jim shiver. 'Give them to me.'

Jim threw them into the pentagram. The light flashed

'It is good' the voice said

'If they come' Jim said

There was no response. The voice was gone if it had ever been there. He leaned closer to the pentagram. The picture was still there but blackened and charred. The sweatband was gone.

In the street there was a noise faint at first then swelling. A hot rod equipped with glasspack mufflers first turning on to Davis Street then approaching. Jim sat down listening to hear if it would go by or turn in.

It turned in.

Footfalls on the stairs, echoing.

Robert Lawson's high-pitched giggle then someone going Shhhhh and then Lawson's giggle again. The footfalls came closer lost their echo and then the glass door at the head of the stairs banged open.

Yoo-hoo Normie David Garcia called, falsetto

You there, Normie?" Lawson whispered, and then giggled. "Was you dere Cholly?"

Vinnie didn't speak but as they advanced up the hall, Jim could see their shadows. Vinnie's was the tallest and he was holding a long object in one hand. There was a light snick of sound, and the long object became longer still.

They were standing by the door Vinnie in the middle They were all holding knives

'Here we come, man,' Vinnie said softly. 'Here we come for your ass.'

Jim turned on the record player

'Jesus!' Garcia called out jumping. 'What's that?'

The freight train was coming closer. You could almost feel the walls thrumming with it

The sound no longer seemed to be coming out of the speakers but from the hall, from down tracks someplace far away in time as well as space

I don't like this, man, Lawson said

It's too late' Vinnie said. He stepped forward and gestured with the knife. Give us your money, dad'

. . . let us go . . .

Garcia recoiled. What the hell

But Vinnie never hesitated. He motioned the others to spread out and the thing in his eyes might have been read

'Come on, kid, how much you got?' Garcia asked suddenly

Four cents Jim said. It was true. He had picked them out of the penny jar in the bedroom. The most recent date was 1946

'You fuckin' liar'

*leave him alone*

Lawson glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened. The walls had become misty insubstantial. The freight train walked. The light from the parking-lot street lamp had reddened, like the neon Burke's Building Company sign, stuttering against the twilight sky

Something was walking out of the pentagram something with the face of a small boy perhaps twelve years old. A boy with a crew cut.

Garcia darted forward and punched Jim in the mouth. He could smell mixed garlic and pepperoni on his breath. It was all slow and purposeless.

Jim felt a sudden heaviness like lead in his groin and his bladder let go. He looked down and saw a dark patch appear and spread on his pants.

I look Vinnie he wet himself! Lawson cried out. The tone was right but the expression on his face was one of horror the expression of a puppet that has come to life only to find itself on strings.

Let him alone the Wayne thing said but it was not Wayne's voice it was the cold greedy voice of the thing from the pentagram Run Jimmy! Run Run! Run!

Jim slipped to his knees and a hand slapped down on his back groping for purchase and found none.

He looked up and saw Vinnie his face stretching into a caricature of hatred drove his knife into the Wayne thing just below the breastbone and then scream his face collapsing in on itself charring blackening becoming awful.

Then he was gone.

Garcia and Lawson struck a moment later, writhed charred and disappeared.

Jim lay on the floor breathing harshly. The sound of the freight train faded.

His brother was looking down at him.

"Wayne" he breathed.

And the face changed. It seemed to melt and run together. The eyes went yellow and a horrible grinning ignorance looked out at him.

I'll come back Jim the cold voice whispered.

And it was gone.

He got up slowly and turned off the record player with one mangled hand. He touched his mouth. It was bleeding.

from Garcia's punch. He went over and turned on the lights. The room was empty. He looked out into the parking lot and that was empty, too, except for one hubcap that reflected the moon in idiot pantomime. The classroom air smelled old and stale - the atmosphere of tombs. He erased the pentagram on the floor and then began to straighten up the desks for the substitute the next day. His fingers hurt very bad y what fingers? He would have to see a doctor. He closed the door and went downstairs slowly, holding his hands to his chest. Halfway down something - a shadow or perhaps only an intuition - made him whirl around.

Something unseen seemed to leap back.

Jim remembered the warning in *Raising Demons* - the danger involved. You could perhaps summon them, perhaps cause them to do your work. You could even get rid of them.

But sometimes they come back.

He walked down the stairs again, wondering if the nightmare was over after all.

## STRAWBERRY SPRING

### *Springheel Jack*

I saw those two words in the paper this morning and my God, how they take me back. As I that was eight years ago a most to the day. Once while I was going on, I saw myself on nationwide TV—the Walter Cronkite Report. Just a hurrying face in the general background behind the reporter, but my looks picked me out right away. They called long distance. My dad wanted my analysis of the situation he was at. Blaft and hearty and man-to-man. My mother just wanted me to come home. But I didn't want to come home. I was enchanted.

Enchanted by that dark and must-brown strawberry spring, and by the shadow of violent death that walked through it on those nights eight years ago. The shadow of Springheel Jack.

In New Eng and they call it a strawberry spring. No one knows why, it's just a phrase the old timers use. They say it happens once every eight or ten years. What happened at New Sharon Teachers College that particular strawberry spring—there may be a cycle for that too, but if anyone has figured it out, they've never said.

At New Sharon, the strawberry spring began on 16 March 968. The coldest winter in twenty years broke on that day. It rained and you could swim in the sea twenty miles west of the beaches. The snow, which had been thirty-five inches deep in places, began to melt and the campus walks ran with slush. The Winter Carnival snow sculptures which

had been kept sharp and clear cut for two months by the sub-zero temperatures at last began to sag and slouch. The caricature of Lyndon Johnson in front of the Tepfer empty house cried the red tears. The dove in front of Prashner Hall lost its frozen feathers and its paws and skeleton showed sadly through in places.

And when night came the fog came with it, moving silent and white along the narrow college avenues and thoroughfares. The pines on the walk poked through it like crooning fingers and it drifted so low as cigarette smoke under the Little bridge down by the Civil War Cannons. It made things seem out of joint, strange, macabre. The unaware traveler would step out of the lake thumping brightly in confusion of the Grinder, expecting the hard bleak starkness of winter to clutch him — and instead he would suddenly find himself in a silent, misty world of white drifting fog, the only sound his own footsteps and the soft drip of water from the ancient gutters. You half expected to see Golum or Frodo and Sam go hurrying past or to turn and see that the Grinder was gone, vanished, replaced by a foggy panorama of mists and new trees and perhaps a Dracula's eye or a sparkling fairy ring.

The jukebox played *Love Is Blue* that year. It played *Rev. Jude* endlessly. It played *Scarborough Fair*.

And at ten minutes after eleven on that night a junior named John Dancey on his way back to his dormitory began screaming into the fog, dropping books on and between the sprawled legs of the dead girl, sing in a shadowy corner of the Animal Sciences parking lot her throat cut from ear to ear but her eyes open and almost seeming to sparkle as if she had just successfully pulled off the funniest joke of her young life. Dancey, an education major and a speech minor, screamed and screamed and screamed.

The next day was overcast and sultry, and we went to classes with questions eager in our mouths — who? why?

when you'd think they'd get her. And I was the first  
to ask questions. I did you know her? Did you know her  
} I had an interest with her  
} But it's not more than a friend's interest  
} You threatened me for a night in with the other girl. She was  
at the next table

Yes

Yes, I

Yes, . . . yes . . . oh yes, I

We all knew her. Her name was Gale German (pronounced *German* not *German*) and she was an attorney. She wore  
grandpa glasses and had a good figure. She was we liked but  
her room mates had hated her. She had never gone out  
much even though she was one of the most promiscuous  
girls in campus. She was ugly but cute. She had been a  
saintly girl who talked nice and smued seldom. She had  
been pregnant and she had had leukemia. She was a lesbian  
who had been murdered by her boy friend. It was straw  
berry spring and on the morning of 7 March we all knew  
Gale German.

Just a dozen State Police cars crawled on to the campus  
to set it hem parked in front of ad the Franklin Hall where  
the German girl had lived. On my way past there to my ten  
o'clock class I was asked to show my student ID. I was  
clever. I showed him the one without the tags.

Do you carry a knife? the policeman asked, and my s

Is it about Gale German? I asked, after I told him that  
the most lethal thing on my person was a rabbit's foot key  
chain.

What makes you ask? He pounced

I was five minutes late to class

It was strawberry spring and no one walked by them  
selves through the half academic, half fantastical campus  
that night. The fog had come again, smearing out the sea  
quiet and deep.

Around nine o'clock my room mate burst out—out from  
where I had been busting my brains on a Milton essay since

seven. They caught him, he said. I heard it over at the Grinder.'

'From who?'

'I don't know. Some guy. Her boy friend did it. His name is Carl Amalara.'

I settled back, relieved and disappointed. With a name like that it had to be true. A lethal and wordful the crime of passion.

'Okay,' I said. 'That's good.'

He left the room to spread the news down the hall. I reread my M. Iton essay, couldn't figure out what I had been trying to say. Tore it up and started again.

It was in the papers the next day. There was an incongruously neat picture of Amalara, probably a high-school graduation picture, and it showed a rather sad-looking boy with an olive complexion and dark eyes and pockmarks on his nose. The boy had not confessed yet, but the evidence against him was strong. He and Gale German had argued a great deal in the last month or so, and had broken up the week before. Amalara's victim said he had been despondent. In a footlocker under his bed, police had found a seven-inch hunting knife from I. L. Bean's and a picture of the girl that had apparently been cut up with a pair of shears.

Beside Amalara's picture was one of Gale German. It blurrily showed a dog, a peeing lawn flamingo, and a rather mousy blonde girl wearing spectacles. An uncomfortable smile had turned her lips up and her eyes were squinted. One hand was on the dog's head. It was true then. It had to be true.

The fog came again that night, not on little cat's feet but in an improper suet spray. I walked that night. I had a headache and I walked for air. Since I left the wet, misty smile of the spring that was slowly sweeping away the reluctant snow, leaving lifeless patches of last year's grass bare and uncolored like the head of a sighing old grandmother.

For me, that was one of the most beautiful nights I can

remember. The people I passed under the haloed street-lights were murmuring shadows, and all of them seemed to be lovers walking with hands and eyes linked. The melting snow dripped and ran, dripped and ran, and from every dark storm drain the sound of the sea drifted up a dark winter sea now strongly ebbing.

I walked until near y midn.ght until I was thorough y mldewed, and I passed many shadows, heard many footfalls clicking dreamily off down the winding paths. Who is to say that one of those shadows was not the man or the thing that came to be known as Springheel Jack? Not I, for I passed many shadows but in the fog I saw no faces.

The next morning the clamour in the hall woke me. I blundered out to see who had been drafted, combing my hair with both hands and running the fuzzy caterpillar that had craftily rep aced my tongue across the dry roof of my mouth.

'He got another one' someone said to me. his face paled w th excitement. 'They had to let him go'

'Who go?'

'Amazara!' someone else said gleefully. He was sitting in jail when it happened.

'When what happened?' I asked patiently. Sooner or later I would get it. I was sure of that.

'The guy killed somebody else last night. And now they're hunting all over for it.'

'For what?'

The pallid face wavered in front of me again. Her head. Whoever killed her took her head with him.

New Sharon isn't a big school now, and was even smaller then. the kind of institution the public relations people chummily refer to as a 'community college'. And I really was like a small community, at least in those days, between you and your friends, you probably had at least a nodding acquaintance with everybody else and their friends. Gale

German had been the type of girl you just nodded to thinking vaguely that you had seen her around.

We all knew Ann Bay. She had been the first runner up in the Miss New England pageant the year before, her talent performance consisting of twirling a flaming baton to the tune of *Hey, Look Me Over*. She was brazen too; until the time of her death she had been editor of the school newspaper (a once weekly rag with a lot of political cartoons and bombastic letters), a member of the Student Dramatics Society, and president of the National Service Sorority New Haven Branch. In the hot, hence hubbub days of my freshman youth I had submitted a column idea to the paper and asked for a date. Turned down, in both counts.

And now she was dead. Worse than dead.

I walked to my afternoon classes like everyone else nodding to people I knew and saying hi with a little more force than usual, as if that would make up for the close way I studied their faces. Which was the same way they were studying mine. There was someone dark among us, as dark as the paths which twisted across the major wood among the hundred year old oaks on the quad in back of the gymnasium. As dark as the hulking Giv' War canons seen through a drifting membrane of fog. We walked into each other's faces and tried to read the darkness behind one of them.

This time the police arrested no one. The blue beetles patrolled the campus ceaselessly on the frigid spring nights of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth and spent this stabbing in the dark nooks and crannies with erratic eagerness. The administration imposed a mandatory nine o'clock curfew. A Leichards couple discovered necking in the landscaped bushes north of the Tate Alumni Building were taken to the New Haven police station and grilled unmercifully for three hours.

There was a hysterical false alarm on the twentieth when a boy was found unconscious in the same parking lot where the body of Gisele German had been found. A gathering

coffee as a pleader. "Hurry," he barked. "It's too late and I don't want the country over his face with a whole bunch of buzzards." I had a pulse and started towards the Iowa bus, a siren wailing across the deserted campus like a screech of ban-shees.

Halfway there the corpse in the back seat had risen and asked hoarsely, "Where the hell am I?" The car shrieked and ran off the road. The corpse turned out to be an undergraduate named Donald Morris who had been in bed the last two days with a pretty nasty case of the "flu." Was it Asian and year I can't remember. Anyway, he hauled in the parking lot on his way to the Cinnabar for a bowl of soup and some toast.

The days continued warm and overcast. People clustered in small groups that had a tendency to break up and re-form with surprising speed. Looking at the same set of faces for too long gave you funny ideas about some of them. And the speed with which rumours swept from one end of the campus to the other began to approach the speed of light. A well liked history professor had been overheard laughing and weeping down by the stone bridge. Gisele German had a facsimile of a weird message written in her handwriting on the back of the Army Sciences parking lot. Both messages were actually political critics of two murders that had been performed by an outfit called the SDS to protest the war. This was really laughable. The New Shakers SDS had seven members. One tall sized. It should would have bankrupted the whole organization. This fact brought an even more sinister atmosphere from the campus right wingers. One of the agitators. So during those queer warm days we all kept our eyes peeled for them.

The press always like a gravedigger's strong resemblance but murdered before Jack the Ripper crawled up on the back of the way to 819. Ann Hay had been found on a soggy path by some who were walking to the nearest sidewalk and yet there were no footprints, not even her own. An enterprising New Hampshire newspaper with a passion for

the Atkins christened the killer Springheel Jack after the infamous Dr John Hawks of Bristol who due to a mix-up of his wives to death with some pharmaceutical knock-knacks. And the name, probably because of that soggy yet unmarked ground, stuck.

On the twenty-first it rained again and the mall and quadrangle became quagmires. The police announced that they were sailing plain clothes detectives men and women about and took half the police cars off duty.

The campus newspaper published a strongly indignant if slightly puritanical editorial protesting this. The upshot of it seemed to be that with all sorts of cops masquerading as students it would be impossible to tell a real outside agitator from a false one.

Twilight came and the fog with it. Drifting up the tree-lined avenues slowly almost thoughtfully blotting out the buildings one by one. It was soft, insubstantial stuff but somehow implacable and frightening. Springheel Jack was a man no one seemed to doubt that but the fog was his accomplice and I was female or so it seemed to me. It was as if our little school was caught between them squeezed in some crazy lover's embrace part of a marriage that had been consummated in blood. I sat and smoked and watched the lights come on in the growing darkness and wondered if it was all over. My room mate came in and shut the door quietly behind him.

It's going to snow soon he said.

I turned around and looked at him. Does the radio say that?

No, he said. Who needs a weatherman? Have you ever heard of strawberry spring?

Maybe, I said. A long time ago. Something grandmothers talk about, isn't it?

He stood beside me looking out at the creeping dark.

Strawberry spring is like Indian summer he said only much more rare. You get a good Indian summer in this part of the country once every two or three years. A spell of

weather like we've been having is supposed to come on every eight or ten. It's a false spring, a lying spring like Indian summer is a false summer. My own grandmother used to say strawberry spring means the worst norther. If the winter is still on the way—and the longer this lasts, the harder the storm.

"Folk tales," I said. "Never believe a word." I looked at him. But I'm nervous. Are you?"

"He smited benevolently and stole one of my cigarettes from the open pack in the window ledge," I suspect every one but me and thee, he said, and then the smile faded a little. "And sometimes I wonder about thee. Want to go over to the Union and shoot some eight ball? I'll spot you ten."

"I'm pre in next week. I'm going to settle down with a magic marker and a hot pad of notes."

For a long time after he was gone, I could only look out the window. And even after I had opened my book and started to part of me was still out there, walking in the shadows where something dark was now in charge.

That night Adele Perkins was killed. Six police cars and seventeenth of the gate locking planned the men (eight of them were women imported all the way from Boston) patrolled the campus. But Sprague Jack knew her just the same, going about the city of the dead on her own. The false spring, the lying spring aided and abetted him. He killed her and left her propped behind the wheel of her 1964 Dodge. He found the next morning and her found part of her in the back seat and part of her in the trunk. And written in blood on the windshield, this time fact instead of rumour, were two words: HA HA!

The campus went slightly mad over that, and us and none of us had known Adele Perkins. She was one of those nameless, harried women who worked the break-back shift in the Under from six to eleven at night, facing horles of hamburgers, trap a student's in study break from the library across the way. She must have had life at very

east those last three foggy nights of her life the curfew was being rigidly observed and after one the timorous town's patrons were hungry cops and hasty janitors the empty buildings had improved their habitual bad temper considerably

There is little left to tell. The police, as prone to hysteria as any of us and driven against the wall, arrested an innocuous homosexual sociology graduate student named Hanson Gray who claimed he could not remember where he had spent several of the recent evenings. They charged him, arraigned him, and let him go to scamper harrumphs back to his native New Hampshire town after the last unspeakable night of strawberry spring when Marsha Curran was slaughtered on the mall

Why she had been out and alone is forever beyond knowing. She was a fat, sadly pretty thing who lived in an apartment in town with three other girls. She had slipped on campus as silently and as easily as Springheel Jack himself. What brought her? Perhaps her need was as deep and as ungovernable as her killer's, and just as far beyond understanding. Maybe a need for one desperate and passionate romance with the warm night, the warm fog, the smell of the sea, and the cold knife.

That was on the twenty-third. On the twenty-fourth the president of the college announced that spring break would be moved up a week and we scattered in it just as the frightened sheep before a storm, leaving the campus empty and haunted by the police and one dark spectre.

I had my own car on campus and I took six people downstate with me, their luggage crammed in the rear seat. It wasn't a pleasant ride. For all any of us knew Springheel Jack might have been in the car with us.

That night the thermometer dropped thirteen degrees and the whole northern New England area was held by a shrieking norther that began in sweet and ended in a foot of snow. The usual number of old duffers had heart attacks

showing it away — and then — like magic — it was April  
and showers and sunny days.

They called it strawberry spring. God knows why — and  
I suspect — like me that it's come since every eight or  
ten years Sprague Jack left with the tag — and by early  
June campus conversation had turned to a series of dis-  
protests and a sit-in at the building where a we I know  
Papa B's manufacturer was holding job interviews. By June  
the subject of the other Jack was a most unanswerable  
avocle — at least a nut. I suspect there were many who  
turned it over and over privately, looking for the one crack  
in the seed, the egg of madness that would make sense of it  
all.

That was the year I graduated — and the next year was the  
year I married. A good job in a local publishing house. In  
1971 we both died — and now we're mostly whoolage. A fine  
and quieting boy with my eyes and her mouth.

Then, today's paper

Of course I knew it was here. I knew it yesterday more so  
when I got up and heard the mysterious sound of snow melting  
running down the gutters — and smelled the salt tang of the  
ocean from our front porch, nine miles from the nearest  
beach. I knew strawberry spring had come again when I  
started home from work last night and I had to turn on my  
headlights against the mist that was already beginning to  
creep out of the fields and hollows, blurring the lines of the  
big trees and putting tiny haloes around the street lamps.

This morning's paper says a girl was killed in the New  
School on campus near the Civil War cannons. She was killed  
last night, and found in a melting snowbank. She was not  
she was not all there.

My wife is upset. She wants to know where I was last  
night. I can't tell her because I don't remember. I remember  
her starting home from work, and I remember putting my  
headlights on to search my way through the hollows creeping  
big, but that's all I remember.

I've been thinking about that foggy night when I had a

headache and walked for art and passed all the love y  
shadows without shape or substance. And I've been think  
ing about the trunk of my car such an ugly word *trunk*  
and wondering why in the world I should be afraid to open  
it

I can hear my wife as I write this, in the next room,  
crying. She thinks I was with another woman last night

And oh dear God, I think so too

## THE LEDGE

“Get out,” Gressner said again. I took out the bag.  
We were in his penthouse apartment, forty-three stories up. The carpet was deep cut pile, burnt orange. In the middle, between the Basque slung chair where Gressner sat and the genuine leather couch where no one sat at all, there was a brown shopping bag.

“It’s a pay off, forget it,” I said. I love her.  
It’s money, but it’s not a pay off, Gressner took. He was smoking a Turkish cigarette in an ash holder. The air circulation system allowed me just a dry whiff of the tobacco and then whipped it away. He was wearing a silk dressing gown in which a dragon was embroidered. His eyes were calm and intelligent behind his glasses. He looked just like what he was: an A-number-one 500-carat tyke in the worst sort of a bitch. I loved his wife, and she loved me. I had expected him to make trouble, and I knew this was it, but I just wasn’t sure what brand it was.

I went to the shopping bag and tipped it over. Banded bundles of currency tumbled out on the rug. A twenties. I picked one of the bundles up and counted. Ten thousand a bundle. There were a lot of bundles.

Twenty thousand dollars, he said, and puffed on his cigarette.

I stood up. “Okay.”

“It’s for you.”

“I don’t want it.”

“My wife comes with it.”

I didn't say anything. Marcia had warned me how it would be. He's like a cat, she had said. An old tom full of meanness. He'll try to make you a mouse.

So you're a tenor pro, he said. I don't believe I've ever actually seen one before.

You mean your detectives didn't get any pictures?

Oh, yes. He waved the cigarette holder negligently. Even a motion picture of the two of you in that Bayside Motel. A camera was behind the mirror. But pictures are hardly the same, are they?

'If you say so.'

He'll keep changing tacks, Marcia had said. It's the way he puts people on the defensive. Pretty soon he'll have you hitting out at where you think he's going to be, and he'll get you somewhere else. Say as little as possible, Stan. And remember that I love you.

I invited you up because I thought we should have a little man-to-man chat. Mr. Norris. Just a pleasant conversation between two civilized human beings, one of whom has made off with the other's wife.'

I started to answer but decided not to.

Did you enjoy San Quentin? Cressner said, puffing away.

'Not particularly.'

'I believe you passed three years there. A charge of breaking and entering, if I'm correct.'

Marcia knows about it, I said, and immediately wished I hadn't. I was playing his game, just what Marcia had warned against. Hitting soft jabs for him to smash back.

I've taken the liberty of having your car moved, he said, gazing out the window at the far end of the room. It really wasn't a window at all, the whole wall was glass. In the middle was a sliding glass door. Beyond it, a balcony the size of a postage stamp. Beyond that, a very long drop. There was something strange about the door. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

This is a very pleasant building, Cressner said. Good

Security. Closed circuit TV and all that. When I knew you were in the lobby I made a telephone call. An employee then hot-wired the ignition of your car and moved it from the parking area here to a public lot several blocks away. He glanced up at the modernistic sunburst clock above the couch. It was 8.05. At 8.20 the same employee was calling the police from a public phone box concerning your car. By 8.40 at the latest, the minkies. If the law were have discovered over six ounces of heroin hidden in the spare tire of your truck. You will be eagerly sought after. Mr Morris.

He had set me up. I had tried to cover myself as well as I could, but in the end I had been child's play for him.

These things will happen in a mess, I call my employee and tell him to forget the phone call.

And all I have to do is tell you where Marcia is. I said. No deal. Cressner. I don't know. We set it up this way just for you.'

My men had her followed.

I don't think so. I think we lost them at the airport.

Cressner sighed, removed the smouldering cigarette holder, and dropped it into a chromium ashtray with a single 'Id No fuss, no muss'. The used cigarette and Stan Morris had been taken care of with equal ease.

Actually, he said, you're right. The old ladies room vanishing act. My operatives were extremely set to have been taken in by such an ancient ruse. I think it was so cold they never expected it.

I said nothing. After Marcia had ditched Cressner's operatives at the airport, she had taken the bus shuttle back to the city and then to the bus station, that had been the plan. She had two hundred dollars, all the money that had been in my savings account. Two hundred dollars and a check, and have a take you anywhere in the country.

Are you always so uncommunicative? Cressner asked and he sounded genuinely interested.

Marcia advised it.

A little more sharply he said. Then I imagine you'll

Stand on your rights when the police take you in. And the next time you see my wife, it could be when she's a wife and grandmother in a rocker. Have you gotten that through your head. I understand that possession is 9/10 chances of her. It could get you forty years.

That won't get you Marcia back.

He smirched thin. 'And that's the rub. It didn't. Shall I review where we are? You and my wife have had an affair. You have had an affair. — if you want to call a series of one-nighters in cheap motel a affair. My wife has left me. However, I have you. And you are in what is called a bind. Does that summarize it adequately?'

I can understand why she got tired of you. I said.

To my surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. You know I rather like you, Mr. Morris. You're vulgar and you're a piker, but you seem to have heart. Marcia said you did. I rather doubted it. Her judgement of character is fair. But you do have a certain... verve. Which is why I've set things up the way I have. No doubt Marcia has told you that I am fond of wagering.

Yes. Now I knew what was wrong with the door in the middle of the glass wall. It was the middle of winter, and no one was going to want to take tea in a basement forty-three stories up. The balcony had been cleared of furniture. And the screen had been taken off the door. Now why would Cressner have done that?

I don't like my wife very much, Cressner said, fixing another cigarette carefully in the holder. That's no secret. I'm sure she's coldly loath as much. And I'm sure a man of your

experience knows that contented wives do not jump into the bay with the local tennis-club girls at the drop of a racket. In my opinion, Marcia is a prissy, when faced, the prude, a whiner, a weeper, a beater of tales, a

That's about enough, I said.

He smirched coyly. I beg your pardon. I keep forgetting we are discussing our beloved. It is 16. Are you nervous?

I shrugged.

'Tough to the end,' he said, and lit his cigarette. 'At any rate, you may wonder why I'd like Marcia so much. I do not simply give her her freedom.'

No, I don't wonder at all.'

He frowned at me.

You're a se-fish, grasping, egocentric son of a bitch. That's why no one takes what's yours. Not even if you don't want it any more.'

He went red and then laughed. 'One for you, Mr Norris. Very good.'

I shrugged again.

I'm going to offer you a wager. If you win, you leave here with the money, the woman, and your freedom. On the other hand, if you lose, you lose your life.'

I looked at the clock. It was 8.19.

'All right,' I said. 'What else? It would buy time, at least time for me to think of some way to beat it out of here, with or without the money.'

Cressner picked up the telephone beside him and dialed a number.

'Tony? Plan two. Yes. He hung up.'

'What's plan two?' I asked.

'I'll call Tony back in fifteen minutes, and he will remove the offending substance from the trunk of your car and drive it back here. If I don't call, he will get in touch with the police.'

'Not very trusting, are you?'

'Be sensible, Mr Norris. There is twenty thousand dollars in the carpet between us. In this city, murder has been committed for twenty cents.'

'What's the bet?'

He looked genuine & pained. 'Wager, Mr Norris. wager. Gentlemen make wagers. No gamblers place bets.'

'Whatever you say.'

'Except it. I've seen you looking at my balcony.'

'The screen's off the door.'

'Yes. I had it taken off this afternoon. What I propose is'

they that you walk around my building on the corner but  
just out just below the penthouse level. It is so you can  
navigate the building successfully the jackpot is yours.

'You're crazy.'

'On the contrary I have proposed this wager on times to  
six different people during my dozen years in this apart-  
ment. Three of the six were professors and others like you.  
One of them a notorious quarterback more famous for his  
TV commercials than his passing game one a baseball  
player one a rather famous boxer who made an extra-  
ordinary yearly salary and who was also afflicted with  
extraordinary arm and shoulder problems. The other three were  
more ordinary citizens who had differing professions but  
two things in common a need for money and a certain  
degree of body grace. He puffed his cigarette thoughtfully  
and then continued. The wager was to be one fifteen times out  
of hand. On the other occasion it was accepted. The terms  
were twenty thousand dollars against six months service to  
me. I collected. The fellow took one look over the edge of  
the balcony and nearly fainted. Cressner looked amused  
and contemptuous. He said everything down there looked  
so small. That was what killed his nerve.'

'What makes you think—'

'He cut me off with an annoyed wave of his hand. 'Don't  
bore me Mr Norris. I think you will do it because you have  
no choice. It is my wager on the one hand or forty years in  
San Quentin on the other. The money and my wife are only  
added trifles indicative of my good nature.'

'What guarantee do I have that you won't double cross  
me. Maybe I'd do it and find out you'd called him and told  
him to go ahead anyway.'

'He sighed. 'You are a walking case of paranoid. Mr  
Norris. I don't love my wife. It is doing my storied ego no  
good at all to have her around. Twenty thousand dollars is a  
penance to me. I pay ten times that every week to be given  
to police bagmen. As far as wages however— His  
eyes gleamed. That is beyond price.'

I just ~~quit~~ it and he left me. I suppose he knew that the new coach ~~wasn't~~ ~~any~~ ~~good~~ himself. I was a thirty six year old tennis bum and the club had been thinking of letting me go when Marvella applied a little gentle pressure. Tennis was the only profession I knew and without it, even getting a job as a janitor would be tough - especially with a record. It was kid stuff, but employers don't care.

And the funny thing was that I really loved Maria Gressner. I had fallen for her after two nine o'clock term lessons, and she had fallen for me just as hard. It was a case of *Star* Norris stuck a light. After thirty-six years of happy bachelorhood I had fallen like a sack of meal for the wife of an Organization overlord.

The old tom sitting there and puffing his imported Turkish cigarette knew all that, of course. And something else as well. I had no guarantee that he wouldn't turn me and I accepted his wager and won, but I knew damn well that I'd be in the cooler by ten o'clock if I didn't. And the next time I'd be free would be at the turn of the century.

I want to know one thing. I said,

What might that be, Mr. Norris?

Look me right in the face and tell me if you're a weeper or not.

He looked at me steadily. 'Mr Norris,' he said quietly, 'I never Welsh.'

Alright. I said. What other choice was there?

He stood up beaming. Excellent. Really excellent. Approach the door to the balcony with me, Mr Morris.

We walked over together. If I take was that of a man who had treasured this scene hundreds of times and was eager to get actually to the fast.

The ledge is five inches wide he said dreamily I've measured it myself In fact I've stood on it hanging on to the balcony of course All you have to do is lower yourself over the wrought iron railing You'll be chest high But of course beyond the railing there are no handgrips You'll

have to inch your way along, being very careful, not to overbalance."

My eye had fastened on something else outside the window — something that made my blood temperature sink several degrees. It was a wind gauge. Cressner's apartment was quite close to the lake, and it was high enough so there were no higher buildings to act as a windbreak. That wind would be cold, and it would cut like a knife. The needle was standing at ten pretty steadily, but a gust would send the needle almost up to twenty-five for a few seconds before dropping off.

"Ah, I see you've noticed my wind gauge," Cressner said jovially. "Actually, it's the other side which gets the prevailing wind, so the breeze may be a little stronger on that side. But actually, this is a fairly still night. I've seen evenings when the wind has gusted up to eighty-five — you can actually feel the building rock a little. A bit like being on a ship in the crow's nest. And it's quite mild for this time of year."

He pointed, and I saw the lighted numerals atop a bank skyscraper to the left. They said it was forty-four degrees. But with the wind, that would have made the chill factor somewhere in the mid-twenties.

"Have you got a coat?" I asked. I was wearing a light jacket.

"As far as no. The lighted figures on the bank switched to show the time. It was 8:32. And I think you had better get started. Mr. Morris, so I can call Tony and put plan three into effect. A good buy but apt to be impulsive. You understand."

I understood all right. Too damn well.

But the thought of being with Marcia, free from Cressner's tentacles and with enough money to get started at something made me push open the sliding-glass door and step out on to the balcony. It was cold and damp; the wind ruffled my hair into my eyes.

"Bonsoir," Cressner said behind me, but I didn't bother

to look back. I approached the railing, but I didn't look down. Not yet. I began to do deep breathing.

It's not really an exercise at all but a form of self-hypnosis. With every inhale-exhale you throw a distraction out of your mind until there's nothing left but the match ahead of you. I got rid of the twinges of home break and Cressner himself with two. Maretta look longer — her face kept rising in my mind, telling me not to be stupid, not to play his game. That maybe Cressner never wished but he always believed his bets. I didn't listen. I couldn't afford to. If I lost this match, I wouldn't have to buy the beers and take the ribbing. I'd be so much scarier if you're splattered to a brick of Pleasant Street in both directions.

When I thought I had it, I looked down.

The building loomed away like a smoky chalk cliff to the street far below. The cars parked there looked like those matchbox models you can buy in the five-and-dime. The ones driving by the building were just tiny pinpoints of light. It's safe that far, you would have plenty of time to run if just what was happening to see the wind blowing your clothes as the earth pulled you back faster and faster. You'd have time to scream a long, long scream. And the sound you made when you hit the pavement would be like the sound of an ice-tube watermelon.

I took a hand and why that other guy had chickened out. But he didn't have so much to worry about. I was staring into the grey Maretta less years with eyes.

I looked at the ledge. It looked solid. I had never seen five inches that looked so much like this. At least the building was fairly new. I wouldn't crumble under me.

I hoped.

I swung over the railing and carefully lowered myself and I was standing on the ledge. My hands were out over the drop. The floor on the balcony was about chest high and I was looking into Cressner's penthouse through the wrought-iron ornamental bars. He was standing inside the

door smoking watching me the way a scientist watches a guinea pig to see what the latest injection will do

Calt I said he clinging on to the railing

'What?'

Calt Tony I don't move until you do

He went back into the living room it looked amazing so warm and safe and cosy and picked up the phone. It was a worthless gesture really. With the wind I couldn't hear what he was saying. He put the phone down and returned. Taken care of Mr Norris

[It better be.]

Goodbye Mr Norris. I'll see you right... perhaps

It was time to do it. Talking was done. I let myself think of Marc a one last time her light-brown hair her wise grey eyes her love's body and then put her out of my mind for good. No more knocking down either. It would have been too easy to get paralysed looking down through that space. Too easy to just freeze up and just lose your balance or just faint from fear. It was time for tunnel vision. Time to concentrate on nothing but left foot right foot.

I began to move to the right, clinging on to the balcony railing as long as I could. It didn't take long to see I was going to need all the tennis muscle my ankles had. With my heels beyond the edge those tendons would be taking all my weight.

I got to the end of the balcony and for a moment I didn't think I was going to be able to let go of that safety. I forced myself to do it. Five inches hell that was plenty of room. If the ledge were only a foot off the ground instead of 400 feet you could breeze around this building as smooth as flat. I told myself. So just pretend it is.

Yeah and if you fall from a ledge a foot off the ground you just say rats and try again. Up here you get only one chance.

I slid my right foot further and then brought my left foot next to it. I let go of the railing. I put my open hands up knowing the palms to rest against the rough stone of the

If I went back again I'd pressed the stone I could have kissed it.

A gust of wind hit me sweeping the collar of my jacket across my face. It taking my body sway to the edge. My heart jumped in my throat and stayed there until the wind had died down. A strong enough gust would have peeled me right off my perch and sent me flying down into the night. And the wind would be stronger on the other side.

I turned my head to the left, pressing my cheek against the stone. Cressner was caving over the balcony watching me.

“Knowing yourself?” he asked softly.

He was wearing a brown camel's hair overcoat.

I thought you don't have a coat. I said.

I did, he answered equably. Like about a lot of things.

What's that supposed to mean?

Nothing... nothing at all. Or perhaps it does mean something. A little psychological warfare eh. Mr Norris. I should tell you not to linger overlong. The ankles grew tired and I knew she was giving way. He took an apple out of his pocket, bit into it and then tossed it over the edge. There was no sound for a long time. Then a faint and sickening snap. Cressner chuckled.

I had broken my concentration, and I could feel panic bubbling at the edges of my mind with steel teeth. A faint effort wanted to push it and I down me. I turned my head away from him and did deep-breathing, flushing the panic away. I was looking at the night bank sign which now said 8:48. Time to leave at 9:00am.

By the time the nighted numbers read 8:49. I felt that I had made another come again. I think Cressner may have decided I was broken and I heard a sardonic patter of applause when I began to shuffle towards the corner of the building again.

I began to feel the cold. The lake had whetted the edge of the wind, its clammy dampness hit at my skin like an dagger. My thin jacket was wedged at behind me as I shuffled along. I

moved slowly, cold or not. If I was going to do this I would have to do it slowly and deliberately. If I rushed, I would fall.

The bank clock read 8:52 when I reached the corner. It didn't appear to be a problem—the ledge went right around, making a square corner—but my right hand told me that there was a crosswind. If I got caught leaning the wrong way, I would take a long ride very quickly.

I waited for the wind to drop, but for a long time it refused to, almost as though it were Cressner's willing ally. It slapped against me with vicious, invisible fingers, prying and poking and tickling. At last, after a particularly strong gust had made me rock on my toes, I knew that I could wait no longer and the wind would never drop all the way off.

So the next time it sank a little, I slipped my right foot around and clutching both walls with my hands, made the turn. The crosswind pushed me two ways at once, and I staggered. For a second I was sickeningly sure that Cressner had won his wager. Then I sidled a step farther along and pressed myself tightly against the wall, a held breath slipping out of my dry throat.

That was when the raspberry went off, almost in my ear. Startled, I jerked back to the very edge of balance. My hands lost the wall, and pinwheeled crazily for balance. I think that one of them had hit the stone face of the building. I would have been gone. But after what seemed an eternity, gravity decided to let me return to the wall, instead of sending down to the pavement forty-three stories below.

My breath sobbed out of my lungs in a pained whistle. My legs were rubbery. The tendons in my ankles were humming like high voltage wires. I had never felt so mortal. The man with the sickle was close enough to read over my shoulder.

I twisted my neck, looked up, and there was Cressner leaning out of his bedroom window four feet above me. He

was smiling. in his right hand he held a New Year's Eve noisemaker.

Just keeping you on your toes, he said.

I didn't waste my breath. I don't have spoken above a certain anyway. My heart was thudding crazy in my chest. I sidled five or six feet along just in case he was thinking about leaping out and giving me a good shove. Then I stopped and closed my eyes and deep breathed until I had my act back together again.

I was on the short side of the building now. On my right only the highest towers of the city backed above me. On the left only the dark curve of the lake with a few pinpricks of light which flared on it. The wind whooped and moaned.

The crosswind at the second corner was not so tricky and I made it around with no trouble. And then something hit me.

I gasped and creaked. The shift of balance scared me and I pressed tightly against the building. I was bitten again. Not bitten but pecked. I looked down.

There was a pigeon standing on the ledge, looking up with bright, hate-filled eyes.

You get used to pigeons in the city. They're as common as cab drivers who can't charge a ten. They don't like to fly and they give ground growling as if the sidewalks were theirs by squatters' rights. Oh yes, and you're apt to find the calling cards on the hood of your car. But you never take much notice. They may be occasionally annoying, but they're interlopers in our world.

But I was a hiss and I was nearly the press and he seemed to know it. He pecked my right eye again, sending a bright dot of pain up my leg.

Get. I snarled at it. Get out!

The pigeon only pecked me again. I was physically in what he regarded as his home. This section of the ledge was covered with droppings, old and new.

A mated cheeping from above.

I cracked my neck as far back as it would go and looked

up. A beak darted at my face and I almost recored. If I had I might have been the city's first pigeon-induced casualty. It was Mama Pigeon protecting a bunch of baby pigeons just under the slight overhang of the roof. Too far up to peck my head, thank God.

Her husband pecked me again and now blood was flowing. I could see it. I began to inch my way along again hoping to scare the pigeon off the ledge. No way. Pigeons don't scare, not city pigeons anyway. It a man's voice only makes them ambie a little faster. A man pinned on a high ledge isn't going to upset them at all.

The pigeon backed up as I shuffled forward, his bright eyes never leaving my face except when the sharp beak dipped to peck my ankle. And the pain was getting more intense now, the bird was pecking at raw flesh — and eating it, for all I knew.

I kicked at it with my right foot. It was a weak kick, the only kind I could afford. The pigeon only fluttered its wings a bit and then returned to the attack. I, on the other hand, almost went off the side.

The pigeon pecked me again, again, again. A cold blast of wind struck me, taking me to the limit of balance, pads of my fingers scraped at the blund stone, and I came to rest with my left cheek pressed against the wall, breathing heavily.

Cressner could have conceived of worse torture if he had planned it for ten years. One peck was not so bad. Two or three were little more. But that damned bird must have pecked me sixty times before I reached the wrought iron railing of the penthouse opposite Cressner's.

Reaching that railing was like reaching the gates of heaven. My hands curled sweetly around the cold uprights and he clung as I, they would never let go.

### Peck

The pigeon was staring up at me a most smugly with its bright eyes, confident of my impotence and its own invulnerability. I was reminded of Cressner's expression when

he had usherted me out onto the balcony on the other side of the building.

Unpinning the green bars more easily I dashed out with a hand strong lock and caught the pigeons in square. I emitted a wholety satisfying squeak and rose it to the air. Wings flapping. A few teachers dove grey, scuttled back to the garage. I scuppered it with down into the darkness swan being a gull and then in the air.

Using I climbed up onto the balcony and I was there. Despite the cold my body was steaming with sweat. I didn't know how long I was here recuperating. The bandage had the back sick and I don't wear a watch.

I sat up before my muscles could stiffen up on me and gingerly bent down my sick. The right ankle was fever ate and bleeding but the wound looked superficial. So I will I have to have it taken care of it before I leave if this God knows what germs pigeons carry around. I thought of bandaging the raw skin but decided not to. I might stumble in a bandage. Time enough later. Then I could buy twenty thousand dollars worth of bandages.

I got up and looked longingly at the decked penthouse opposite. Lessner's barren empty arched in. The heavy screen was set by now. I might have been able to break in but that would have been forfeiting the bet. And I had more to lose than money.

When I could put it no longer I crept over the railing and back out to the ledge. The pigeon a few teachers white fur wear was standing below his mate's nest where the gull was huddled trying the寒寒寒. But I didn't think he'd bother me not when he saw I was moving away.

It was very hard to move away much harder than I had been a leave Lessner's balcony. My mind knew I had to but my body part and my ankles was screaming that it would be the end of such a safe harbour. But I did leave with Matilda's face in the darkness guiding me in.

I got to the set and shakily I made it around the corner and shuffled slowly across the width of the building. Now

that I was getting close, there was an almost tangible urge to hurry to get it over with. But if I hurried I would die. So I forced myself to go slowly.

The crosswind almost got the agitato on the fourth corner and I slumped around. I thanks to luck rather than skill. I rested against the building, getting my breath back. But for the first time I knew that I was going to make it, that I was going to win. My hands felt like half-frozen steaks, my ankles hurt like fire (especially the pigeon-pecked right ankle). Sweat kept trickling in my eyes, but I knew I was going to make it. Halfway down the length of the building warm yellow light spiled out on Cressner's balcony. Far beyond I could see the bark sign glowing like a welcome home banner. It was 11:45, but it seemed that I had spent my whole life on those five inches of ledge.

And God help Cressner if he tried to wish. The urge to hurry was gone. I almost lingered. It was 11:49 when I put first my right hand on the wrought iron balcony railing and then my left. I hauled myself up, wriggling over the top collapsed thankfully on the floor . . . and to the cold steel muzzle of a .45 against my temple.

I awoke up and saw a going up & enough to stop Big Ben dead in its clockwork. He was grinning.

Excellent! Cressner's voice said from within. I app and you Mr. Norris! He proceeded to do just that. Bring him in, Tony!

Tony hauled me up and set me on my feet so abruptly that my weak ankles almost buckled. Coming in I staggered against the balcony door.

Cressner was standing by the living room fireplace, sipping brandy from a glass of the size of a fish-bowl. The money had been replaced in the shopping bag. It still stood in the middle of the burnt orange rug.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror in the other side of the room. The hair was disheveled, the face pale except for two bright spots of color on the cheeks. The eyes looked insane.

I got only a glimpse because the next moment I was flying across the room. I hit the Basque chair and it never hit the floor, it fell down on top of me and losing my wind.

When I got some of it back I sat up and managed. You know we shot. You had this planned.

Indeed I did. Cressner said, carefully setting his brandy on the mantle. But I'm not a weisher, Mr. Norris. Indeed no. Just an extreme & poor loser. Tony is here only to make sure you don't do anything... I advised. He put his fingers under his chin and tutored a little. He didn't look like a poor loser. He looked more like a cat with canary feathers on his muzzle. I got up suddenly, seeing more frightened than I had on the ledge.

You fixed it, I said slowly. Somehow you fixed it.

Not at all. The heroin has been removed from your car. The car itself is back in the parking lot. The money's over there. You may take it and go.

Fine, I said.

Tony stood by the glass door to the balcony, still looking like a leftover from Halloween. The 45 was in his hand. I walked over to the shopping bag, picked it up and walked towards the door on my jittery ankles, fully expecting to be shot down in my tracks. But when I got the door open, I began to have the same feeling that I'd had on the ledge when I rounded the fourth corner. I was going to make it.

Cressner's voice, lazy and amused, stopped me.

You don't really think that old guy's gonna dodge you, do you?

I turned back slowly, the shopping bag in my arms. What do you mean?

I told you I never weish and I never do. You've got three things, Mr. Norris. The money, your freedom, my wife. You have the first two. You can pick up the third at the country morgue.

I stared at him, unable to move, frozen in a soundless thunderclap of shock.

You didn't really think I'd let you have her? he asked me.

pityingly. Oh no. The money yes. Your freedom yes. But not Marcia. Still I don't Welsh. And after you've had her buried?

I didn't go near him. Not then. He was far later. I walked towards Tony, who looked slightly surprised until Cressner said in a bored voice. Shoot him, please.

I threw the bag of money. It hit him squarely in the gun hand and I struck him hard. I hadn't been using my arms and wrists out here and they're the best part of any tennis player. His bullet went into the burnt-orange rug and then I had him.

His face was the toughest part of him. I yanked the gun out of his hand and hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barre. He went down with a single very weary grunt looking like Rondo Hatton.

Cressner was almost out the door when I snapped a shot over his shoulder and said. Stop right there or you're dead.

He thought about it and stopped. When he turned around his Christopherian weird weary act had carded a little around the edges. It carded a little more when he saw Tony lying on the floor and choking on his own blood.

She's not dead, he said quickly. I had a salvage something didn't I? He gave me a sick cheese-eating grin.

I'm a sucker, but I'm not that big a sucker, I said. My voice sounded lifeless, dead. Why not? Marcia had been my life and this man had put her in a slab.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Cressner pointed at the money tumbling around Tony's feet. That, he said, that's chickenfeed. I can get you a hundred thousand. Or five. Or how about a million, all of it in a Swiss bank account? How about that? How about?

I'll make you a bet, I said slowly.

He looked from the barre of the gun to my face. A

A bet, I repeated. Not a wager. Just a plain old bet. I'll bet you can't walk around this building on the ledge out there.'

His face went dead pale. For a moment I thought he was going to faint. You — he whispered

These are the stakes. I said in my dead voice. If you make it I let you go. How's that?

No, he whispered. His eyes were huge, staring.

Okay, I said, and cocked the pistol.

No! he said, holding his hands out. No. Don't! — all right. He licked his lips.

I motioned with the gun, and he preceded me out on to the balcony. You're shaking, I told him. That's going to make it harder.

Two million, he said, and he couldn't get his voice above a husky whine. Two million unmarked bills.

No, I said. Not for ten million. But if you make it, you go free. I'm serious.

A minute later he was standing on the ledge. He was shorter than I, you could just see his eyes over the edge, wide and beseeching, and his white knuckled hands gripping the iron rail like prison bars.

Please, he whispered. Anything.

You're wasting time, I said. It takes it out of the ankles.

But he wouldn't move until I had put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead. Then he began to shuffle to the right, meowing. I glanced up at the bank clock. It was 29.

I didn't think he was going to make it to the first corner. He didn't want to budge at all, and when he did, he moved jerkily, taking risks with his centre of gravity. It's dressing going to a wing isn't the night.

He disappeared around the corner and out of sight at 12. I almost forty minutes ago. I listened closely for the diminishing scream as the crosswind got him, but it didn't come. Maybe the wind had dropped. I do remember banking the wind was on his side when I was out there. Or maybe he was just lucky. Maybe he's out on the other balcony now, quivering in a heap, afraid to go any further.

But he probably knows that if I catch him there when I

break into the other penthouse. I shoot him down like a dog. And speaking of the other side of the building. I wonder how he likes that pigeon.

Was that a scream? I don't know. It might have been the wind. It doesn't matter. The bank clock says 12:44. Pretty soon I'll break into the other apartment and check the balcony, but right now I'm just sitting here on Cressner's balcony with Tony's 44 in my hand. Just on the off-chance that he might come around that last corner with his dressing gown billowing out behind him.

Cressner said he's never welsched on a bet.  
But I've been known to.

## THE LAWNMOWER MAN

In previous years Harold Parkette had a way taken pride in his own. He had owned a large silver Lawmboy and paid the boy down the block five dollars per cutting to push it. In those days Harold Parkette had followed the Boston Red Sox in the radio with a beer in his hand and the knowledge that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world including his town. But last year in mid-October fate had played Harold Parkette a nasty trick. While the boy was mowing the grass for the last time of the season, the Costermeyer dog had chased the Smiths' cat under the mower.

Harold's daughter had thrown up half a quaffed cherry Kroc. And into the lap of her new jumper and his wife had nightmares for a week afterwards. Although she had arrived after the fact, she had arrived in time to see Harold and the green-faced boy cleaning the blades. Their daughter and Mrs. Smith stood over them weeping, although Alicia had taken time enough to change her jumper for a pair of blue jeans and one of those disgusting skimp sweaters. She had a crush on the boy who mowed the lawn.

After a week of listening to his wife moan and groan in the next bed, Harold decided to get rid of the mower. He didn't really need a mower anyway, he supposed. He had hired a boy this year, next year he would just hire a boy and a mower. And maybe Costermeyer would stop moaning in her sleep. He might even get laid again.

So he took the silver Lawmboy down to Phil's Sunoco

and he and Phil dickered over it. Harry came away with a brand-new kevlar blackwall tire and a tankful of gas, and Phil put the silver lawphox up on one of the pump stands with a hand-lettered H-F-S-K-ESIGN on it.

And this year Harry just kept putting off the necessary hiring. When he finally got around to ordering his new shoes his mother told him Frank had gone to the state university. Harry shook his head in wonder and went to the drugstore to get a beer. Time certainly flew, didn't it? My God, yes.

He put off hiring a new boy as first May and then June slipped past him and the Red Sox continued to wallow in fourth place. He sat in the back porch on the weekends and watched guitars as a never-ending progression of young boys he had never seen before popped out to muller a quick hole before taking his buxom daughter off to the local pawn shop. And the grass thrived and grew with a marvelous way. It was a good summer for grass, three days of shine followed by one of gentle rain, almost like clockwork.

By mid-July the lawn looked more like a meadow than a suburbanite's backyard, and Jack Castlemeyer had begun to make acerbic, but friendly, unfunny jokes, most of which concerned the price of hay and a hole. And Don Smith's four-year-old daughter Jenny had taken to having, not when there was a meal, but breakfast or spaghetti for supper.

One day pastore Jay Harry went out on the porch during the seventh-inning stretch and saw a woodchuck sitting perkily on the overgrown back wall. The time had come, he decided. He flicked off the radio, picked up the paper, and turned to the classifieds. And halfway down the Pastime column he found this *Lawn mowed. Reasonable* 776-2390.

Harry called the number, expecting a vacuuming housewife who would be outside for her son. Instead, a brisk, professional voice said, *Pastoral Greenery and Outdoor Services*. "How may we help you?"

Cautiously Harry did the voice how Pastoral Greenery

and a pair of blue eyes by the window  
glittered brightly with a sense of fun. He  
had asked the same about rates and he was quite a reasonable figure.

He stood but, up with a meeting feeling of unease and  
went back to the porch. His sweater buttoned at the waist  
and stood out over his jeans. He lay down on the sofa. His  
eyes were moving slowly across the featureless sky. Carl and  
Vicki were at his mother's in law's and the house was his. It  
would be a pleasant surprise for them. The boy who was  
carrying out the lawn finished before they came back.

He racked a beer and sighed as Dick Drago was touched  
for a double and then hit a batter. A cool breeze shuffled  
across the screened porch. Crickets hummed softly in  
the long grass. Italo dug out something unkind about  
Dick Drago and then dozed off.

He was woken awake a half hour later by the doorknob. He  
knocked, yet his heart getting up to answer it.

A man in grass stained denim overalls stood in the front  
step chewing a cornpick. He was fat. The curve of his  
body pushed his faded blue overalls out to a point where  
Italo had suspected he had swallowed a basket hat.

"Yes." He said. Parket asked if he had a sleep.  
The man grunted, raked his withered arm in the corner of  
his mouth, then after fidgeted at the seat of his overalls  
and then pushed his green baseball cap up a notch on his  
forehead. There was a smear of fresh concrete on the bill  
of his cap. And there he was smoking a grass earth and  
mowing a lawn. Harold Parket.

"Past to sent me butts," he said, now scratching his  
ear. "You scared right. Right baddies." He grunted up  
endlessly.

"Oh. The lawn. You." Harold stared stupidly.  
"Yep me. The awnmower man be a wed fresh laughter  
of hate ass sleep puffy face."

"That's a stink he pieces you see and the lawnmower man  
trumped ahead of him down the hill through he is big

room and kitchen, and on to the back porch. Now Harold had placed the man and everything was a bright. He had seen the type before, working for the sanitation department and the highway repair crews out on the turnpike. Always with a spare in route to lean on their shovels and smoke Lucky Strikes or Camels, looking at you as if they were the salt of the earth, able to hit you for five or sleep with your wife any time they wanted to. Harold had always been slightly afraid of men like this. They were always tanned dark brown, there were always nests of wrinkles around their eyes, and they always knew what to do.

The back lawn's the real chore, he told the man unconsciously deepening his voice. It's square and there are no obstructions, but it's pretty well grown up. His voice faltered back into its normal register and he found himself apologizing. I'm afraid I've let it go.

No sweat, buddy. No strain. Great, great, great. The lawnmower man grinned at him with a thousand travelling-salesmen jokes in his eyes. The taller, the better. Healthy soil, that's what you got there, by Gosh. That's what I always say.

*(By Carse?)*

The lawnmower man flicked his head at the radio. Yastrzemski had just struck out. Red Sox fan? I'm a Yankees man, myself. He clamped back into the house and down the front hall. Harold watched him bitterly.

He sat back down and looked accusingly for a moment at the puddle of beer under the table with the overturned Coors can in the middle of it. He thought of getting the mop from the kitchen and decided it would keep.

*No sweat. No strain.*

He opened his paper to the financial section and cast a jealous eye at the closing stock quotations. As a good Republican, he considered the Wall Street executives behind the columned type to be at least in no demigods.

*(By Carse??)*

and he had wished many times that he could better

understand the Word as handed down from the mount no. on stone tablets but in such enigmatic abbreviations as pot and kdk and 3 28 up 2,3. He had once bought a judicious three shares in a company called Midwest Bisonburgers Inc., that had gone broke in 1968. He had lost his entire seventy-five dollar investment. Now, he understood, bisonburgers were quite the coming thing. The wave of the future. He had discussed this often with Sonny, the bartender down at the Goldfish Bowl. Sonny told Harold his trouble was that he was five years ahead of his time and he should...

A sudden racketing roar startled him out of the new doze he had just been slipping into.

Harold jumped to his feet knocking his chair over and staring around wildly.

That's a lawnmower?" Harold Parkette asked the kitchen. "My God, that's a lawnmower?"

He rushed through the house and stared out of the front door. There was nothing out there but a battered green van with the words PASTORAL GREENERY INC. painted on the side. The roaring sound was in back now. Harold rushed through his house again, burst on to the back porch and stood frozen.

It was obscene.

It was a travesty.

The aged red power mower the fat man had brought in his van was running on its own. No one was pushing it - in fact, no one was within five feet of it. It was running at a fever pitch, tearing through the unfortunate grass of Harold Parkette's back lawn like an avenging red devil straight from hell. It screamed and bellowed and farted oily black smoke in a crazed kind of mechanical madness that made Harold tee off with terror. The overripe smell of cut grass hung in the air like sour wine.

But the lawnmower man was the true obscenity.

The lawnmower man had removed his clothes - every stitch. They were folded neatly in the empty birdbath that

was at the centre of the back lawn. Naked and grass-stained he was crawling along about five feet behind the mower eating the cut grass. Green juice ran down his chin and dripped on to his pendulous belly. And every time the lawnmower whirled around a corner he rose and did an odd skipping jump before prostrating himself again.

"Stop!" Harold Parkette screamed. "Stop that!"

But the lawnmower man took no notice and his screaming scarlet face never slowed. If anything it seemed to speed up. Its nicked steel grill seemed to grin sweetly at Harold as it raved by.

Then Harold saw the mole. It must have been hiding in stunned terror just ahead of the mower in the swath of grass about to be slaughtered. It bolted across the cut band of lawn towards safety under the porch a panicky brown streak.

The lawnmower swerved.

Blatting and howling it roared over the mole and spat it out in a string of fur and entrails that reminded Harold of the Smiths' cat. The mole destroyed the lawnmower rushed back to the main job.

The lawnmower man crawled rapidly by, eating grass. Harold stood paralysed with horror, stocks, bonds and bisonburgers completely forgotten. He could actually see that huge pendulous belly expanding. *The lawnmower man swerved and ate the mole.*

That was when Harold Parkette leaned out of the screen door and vomited into the zinnias. The world went grey and suddenly he realized he was ainting had failed. He collapsed backwards on to the porch and closed his eyes.

Someone was shaking him. Carla was shaking him. He hadn't done the dishes or emptied the garbage and Carla was going to be very angry but that was all right. As long as she was waking him up, taking him out of the horrible dream he had been having back into the normal world.

He got up slowly like a policed old man. Of course he  
had to take a few steps with the Planters King cigarette in his  
buck teeth -

Buck teeth yes but not Carter's buck teeth. Carter had  
weak looking human buck teeth. But these teeth were  
Hairy

Green hair was growing on these buck teeth. I almost  
looked like -

Grays?

Oh my God Harold said

You wanted buck teeth right bah. The lawnmower man  
was bending over him grunting with his hairy teeth. His  
nose and chin were hairy too. Everything was hairy. And  
green. The yard stank of grass and gas and the sudden  
silence

Harold bolted up to a sitting position and stared at the  
lawnmower. All the grass had been neatly cut. And there  
would be no need to take this job. Harold observed sickly.  
If the lawnmower man missed a single cut blade he  
couldn't see it. He squinted obliquely at the lawnmower  
man and twiced. He was still naked still fat still terrifying.  
Green tracks ran from the corners of his mouth.

What is this? Harold begged

The man was far from being a star the man. This? Well  
it's a new thing the boss has been trying. It works just real  
good. Real good, buddy. We're cutting 50 birds with one  
stone. We keep going along towards the final stage and  
we're making money to support our other operations to  
boot. See what I mean. Of course every now and then we  
run into a customer who doesn't understand. Some people  
get no respect for efficiency, right? but the boss is always  
accessible to a customer. So is I keeps the wheels greased. I  
you catch me?

Harold said nothing. One word knocled over and over in  
his mind and that word was sacrifice. In his mind he  
saw the man spewing out from under the battered red  
mower.

He got up slowly like a policed old man. Of course he

said, and could only come up with a line from one of Alicia's folk-rock records. God bless the grass.

The lawnmower man slapped one summer apple coloured thigh. 'That's pretty good, buddy. In fact, that's damned good. I can see you got the right spirit. Okay if I write that down when I get back to the office? Might mean a promotion.'

'Certainly,' Harold said, retreating towards the back door and striving to keep his meaning straight in place. 'You go right ahead and finish. I think I'll take a little nap -'

'Sure, buddy,' the lawnmower man said, getting ponderously to his feet. Harold noticed the unusually deep split between the first and second toes, almost as if the feet were, well, cloven.

'It has everybody kinda hard at first,' the lawnmower man said. 'You get used to it.' He eyed Harold's portly figure shrewdly. 'In fact, you might even want to give it a whirl yourself. The boss has always got an eye out for new talent.'

'The boss,' Harold repeated faintly.

The lawnmower man paused at the bottom of the steps and gazed to erantly up at Harold Parkette. 'Well, say, buddy. I figured you must have guessed.' God bless the grass and all.'

Harold shook his head carefully and the lawnmower man laughed.

'Pan Pan's the boss.' And he did a half hop-ha-f shuffle in the newly cut grass and the lawnmower screamed into life and began to trundle around the house.

'The neighbours,' Harold began, but the lawnmower man only waved cheerily and disappeared.

Out front the lawnmower hatted and howled. Harold Parkette refused to look, as if by refusing he could deny the grotesque spectacle that the Castlemeyers and Smiths, wretched Democrats both, were probably drinking in with horrified but no doubt righteously folded you-so eyes.

Instead of joking, Harold went to the telephone,

snatched it up and dialed police headquarters from the emergency deck pasted on the phone's handset.

Sergeant Hall, the voice at the other end said.

Harold stuck a finger to his free ear and said, My name is Harold Parkette. My address is 421 East Endicott Street. I'd like to report... What? What would he like to report? A man is in the process of raping and murdering my lawn and he works for a fellow named Pan and has cloven feet?

'Yes, Mr Parkette?'

Inspiration struck. 'I'd like to report a case of indecent exposure.'

'Indecent exposure?' Sergeant Hall repeated.

'Yes. There's a man mowing my lawn. He's in the... uh... altogether.'

'You mean he's naked?' Sergeant Hall asked pointedly.

'Naked!' Harold agreed, holding tightly to the frayed ends of his sanity. 'Nude. Unclothed. Bare-assed. On my front lawn. Now will you get somebody the hell over here?'

'That address was 421 West Endicott?' Sergeant Hall asked bemusedly.

'East. Harold ye leu. For God's sake -'

'And you say he's definitely naked? You are able to observe his... uh... genitals and so on?'

Harold tried to speak and could only gag. The sound of the insane lawnmower seemed to be growing louder and louder, drowning out everything in the universe. He felt his gorge rise.

'Can you speak up?' Sergeant Hall buzzed. 'There's an awfully noisy connection there at your end.'

The front door crashed open.

Harold looked around and saw the lawnmower man's mechanized familiar advancing through the door. Behind it came the lawnmower man himself, still quite naked. With something approaching true insanity, Harold saw the man's pubic hair was a rich, fertile green. He was twirling his baseball cap on one finger.

That was a mistake, buddy, the lawnmower man said reproachfully. You shoulda stuck with God, bless the grass.

Hello? He is Mr Parkette -

The telephone dropped from Harold's nerveless fingers as the lawnmower began to advance on him, cutting through the nap of Canis's new Mithawk rug and spitting out brown banks of fibre as it came.

Harold stared at it with a kind of bird and snake fascination until it reached the coffee table. When the mower shunted it aside, shearing one leg into sawdust and splinters as it did so, he climbed over the back of his chair and began to retreat towards the kitchen, dragging the chair in front of him.

That won't do any good, buddy, the lawnmower man said kindly. Apt to be messy, too. Now if you was just to show me where you keep your sharpest butcher knife, we could get this sacker business out of the way real pa'ness.

I think the birdbarb would do - and then -

Harold shoved the chair at the lawnmower, which had been craftily flanking him while the naked man drew his attention and bolted through the doorway. The lawnmower plowed around the chair, letting out exhaust and as Harold smashed open the porch screen door and leaped down the steps, he heard it - smacked it - felt it - right at his heels.

The lawnmower roared off the top step like a skier going off a jump. Harold sprinted across his new, cut-back lawn but there had been too many beers, too many afternoon naps. He could sense it tearing him then, in his heels, and then he looked over his shoulder and tripped over his own feet.

The last thing Harold Parkette saw was the grinding gash of the charging lawnmower, rocking back to reveal its fleshing green stains bled, and above it, the fat face of the lawnmower man, shaking his head in good natured reproach.

He lot a thing Lieutenant Goodwin said as the last of the photographs were taken. He nodded to the two men in white and they trundled their basket across the lawn. He reported some naked guy on his lawn not two hours ago.

'Is that so?' Patrolman Cooley asked.

'Yeah. One of the neighbours called in too. Guy named Castenmeyer. He thought it was Parkette himself. Maybe it was Cooley. Maybe it was.'

'Sir?'

'Crazy with the heat.' Lieutenant Goodwin said gravely and tapped his temple. 'Schizo-fucking phrenia.'

'Yes sir.' Cooley said respectfully.

'Where's the rest of him?' one of the white-coats asked.

'The birdbath,' Goodwin said. He looked profoundly up at the sky.

'Did you say the birdbath?' the white-coat asked.

'Indeed I did.' Lieutenant Goodwin agreed. Patrolman Cooley looked at the birdbath and suddenly lost most of his tan.

'Sex maniac.' Lieutenant Goodwin said. 'Must have been.'

'Prints?' Cooley asked thickly.

'You might as well ask for footprints.' Goodwin said. He gestured at the newly cut grass.

Patrolman Cooley made a strangled noise in his throat.

Lieutenant Goodwin stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. The world, he said gravely, is full of nuts. Never forget that. Cooley. Schizos. Lab boys. Sure somebody chased Parkette through his own living room with a lawnmower. Can you imagine that?

'No sir,' Cooley said.

Goodwin looked out over Harold Parkette's nearly manicured lawn. Well, like the man said when he saw the black-haired Swede, it sure is a nose of the different colour.'

Goodwin strolled around the house and Coolty followed him. Behind them the scent of newly mown grass hung pleasantly in the air.

## QUITTERS, INC

Morrison was waiting for someone who was hung up in the air, rather jam over Kennedy Internationale, when he saw a familiar face at the end of the bar and walked down

Jimmy 'Jimmy McCann'

It was. A little heavier than when Morrison had seen him at the Atlantic Exhibition the year before, but otherwise he looked awesomely fit. In college he had been a thin, pale chain-smoker buried behind huge horn-rimmed glasses. He had apparently switched to contact lenses.

Dick Morrison?

Yeah. You look great. He extended his hand and they shook.

So do you, McCann said, but Morrison knew it was a lie. He had been overworking, overeating, and smoking too much. Who are you drinking?

Baileys and bitters, Morrison said. He hooked his feet around a bar stool and lit a cigarette. Meeting someone, Jimmy?

No. Going to Miami for a conference. A heavy client. B15 six million. I'm supposed to be cold this hand because we lost out on a big spec a' next spring.

Are you still with Crager and Burton?

Executive veep now.

Fantastic. Congratulations! When did all this happen? He tried to tell himself that the little worm of jealousy in his stomach was just acid indigestion. He pulled out a roll of antacid pills and crunched one in his mouth.

Last August Something happened that changed my life. He looked speculatively at Morrison and sipped his drink. You might be interested.

My God Morrison thought with an inner voice - *isn't McCann's got religion?*

Sure, he said, and gulped at his drink when it came.

I wasn't in very good shape. McCann said. Personal problems with Sharon, my daughter, heart attack, and I developed this hacking cough. Bobby Crager dropped by my office one day and gave me a fatherly little pep talk. Do you remember what those ate like?

Yeah. He had worked at Crager and Barton for eighteen months before joining the Morton Agency. Get your butt in gear or get your butt out.

McCann laughed. You know it. Well, to put the capper on it, the doc told me I had an incipient ulcer. He told me to quit smoking. McCann grimaced. Might as well tell me to quit breathing.

Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Non-smokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.

Did you quit? He asked.

Yes, I said. At first I didn't think I'd be able to. I was cheating like hell. Then I met a guy who told me about an outfit over on Forty-sixth Street. Specialists. I said what do I have to lose and went over. I haven't smoked since.

Morrison's eyes twinkled. What do they do? For a fix of some drug?

No. He had taken out his wallet and was rummaging through it. Here it is. I knew I had one kicking around. He laid a plain white business card on the bar between them.

#### QUITTERS, INC.

*Stop Going Up in Smoke*

237 East 46th Street

Treatments by Appointment

'Keep it, if you want,' McCann said. 'They'll cure you. Guaranteed.'

'How?'

I can't tell you, McCann said.

'Huh? Why not?'

It's part of the contract they make you sign. Anyway, they tell you how it works when they interview you.'

You signed a contract?

McCann nodded.

And on the basis of that?

Yep. He smiled at Morrison, who thought: Well, it's happened. Jim McCann has joined the smug bastards.

Why the great secrecy if this outfit is so fantastic? How come I've never seen any spots on TV, billboards, magazine ads -?

They get all the clients they can handle by word of mouth.

You're an advertising man, Jimmy. You can't believe that.'

'I do,' McCann said. They have a ninety-eight per cent cure rate.

Wait a second, Morrison said. He motioned for another drink and lit a cigarette. Do these guys strap you down and make you smoke until you throw up?

No.'

Give you something so that you get sick every time you light.'

No, it's nothing like that. Go and see for yourself. He gestured at Morrison's cigarette. 'You don't really like that, do you?'

'Nooo, but -'

Stopping really changed things for me,' McCann said. 'I don't suppose it's the same for everyone, but with me it was just like dominoes falling over. I felt better and my relationship with Sharon improved. I had more energy, and my job performance picked up.'

'Look you've got my curiosity aroused. Can't you just—'

'I'm sorry, Dick. I really can't talk about it.' His voice was firm.

'Did you put on any weight?'

For a moment he thought Jimmy McCann looked almost grim. 'Yes. A little too much, in fact. But I took it off again. I'm about right now. I was skinny before.'

Flight 706 now boarding at Gate 9, the loudspeaker announced.

'That's me,' McCann said, getting up. He tossed a five on the bar. 'Have another if you like. And think about what I said, Dick. Really.' And then he was gone, making his way through the crowd to the escalators. Morrison picked up the card, looked at it thoughtfully, then tucked it away in his wallet and forgot it.

The card fell out of his wallet and on to another bar a month later. He had left the office early and had come here to drink the afternoon away. Things had not been going so well at the Morton Agency. In fact, things were bloody horrible.

He gave Henry a ten to pay for his drink, then picked up the small card and reread it. 237 East Forty-sixth Street was only two blocks over. It was a cool, sunny October day outside, and maybe just for chockies.

When Henry brought his change, he finished his drink and then went for a walk.

Quitters, Inc., was in a new building where the monthly rent on office space was probably close to Morrison's yearly salary. From the directory in the lobby, it looked to him like their offices took up one whole floor—and that spewed money. Lots of it.

He took the elevator up and stepped off into a lushly carpeted foyer and from there into a gracefully appointed reception room with a wide window that looked out on the scurrying bugs below. Three men and one woman sat in the

chairs along the wall reading magazines. Business types  
sat in them. Morrison went to the desk.

A friend gave me this, he said, passing the card to the  
receptionist. I guess you'd say he's an alumnus.

She smiled and typed a form into her typewriter. What is  
your name, sir?

Richard Morrison.

Clack-clack-clack. But very muted clacks. The type-  
writer was an IBM.

Your address?

Twenty-nine Maple Lane Clinton New York.

Married?

Yes.

Children?

One. He thought of *Alvin* and frowned slightly. One  
was the wrong word. A half might be better. His son was  
mentally retarded and lived at a special school in New  
Jersey.

Who recommended us to you, Mr Morrison?

An old school friend James McCann.

Very good. Will you have a seat? It's been a very busy  
day.

All right.

He sat between the woman who was wearing a severe  
blue suit and a young executive type wearing a bunting-  
bore jacket and modish sideburns. He took out his pack  
of cigarettes, looked around and saw there were no ash-  
trays.

He put the pack away again. That was a bright. He would  
see this little game through and then right up where he was  
leaving. He might even tap some ashes on their maroon  
shag rug if they made him wait long enough. He picked up a  
copy of *Time* and began to leaf through it.

He was called a quarter of an hour later after the woman  
in the blue suit. His nicotine centre was speaking quite  
loudly now. A man who had come in after him took out a  
cigarette case, snapped it open, saw there were no ashtrays.

and put it away looking a little guilty. Morrison thought it made him feel better.

At last the receptionist gave him a sunny smile and said  
Go right in Mr Morrison.

Morrison walked through the door beyond her desk and found himself in an indirectly lit hallway. A heavy set man with white hair that looked phoney shook his hand smartly and said I know me Mr Morrison.

He led Morrison past a number of closed unmarked doors and then opened one of them about halfway down the hall with a key. Beyond the door was an austere little room walled with dried white cork panes. The only furnishings were a desk with a chair on either side. There was what appeared to be a small oblong window in the wall behind the desk but it was covered with a short green curtain. There was a picture on the wall to Morrison's left a tall man with iron grey hair. He was holding a sheet of paper in one hand. He looked vaguely familiar.

I'm Mr Donatti the heavy set man said. If you decide to go ahead with our programme I'll be in charge of your case.

Pleased to know you Morrison said. He wanted a cigarette very badly.

'Have a seat.'

Donatti put the receptionist's form on the desk and then drew another form from the desk drawer. He looked directly into Morrison's eyes. Do you want to quit smoking?

Morrison cleared his throat crossed his legs and tried to think of a way to equivocate. He er a sort. Yes he said.

Will you sign this? He gave Morrison the form. He scanned it quickly. The undersigned agrees not to divulge the methods or techniques or *et cetera et cetera*

Sure he said and Donatti put a pen in his hand. He scratched his name and Donatti signed below it. A moment later the paper disappeared back into the desk drawer. Well he thought ironically I've taken the judge

He had taken it before. Once it had last for two whole days.

Good, Donatt said. We don't bother with propaganda here. Mr Morrison. Questions of health or expense or social grace. We have no interest in why you want to stop smoking. We are pragmatists.

Good, Morrison said blankly.

We employ no drugs. We employ no Dale Carnegie people to sermonize you. We recommended no special diet. And we accept no payment if and you have stopped smoking for one year.

My God, Morrison said.

Mr McCann didn't tell you that?

No.

How is Mr McCann by the way? Is he well?

'He's fine.'

Wonderful. Excellent. Now just a few questions, Mr Morrison. These are somewhat personal, but I assure you that your answers will be held in strictest confidence.

'Yes?' Morrison asked noncommittally.

What is your wife's name?

Lucinda Morrison. Her maiden name was Ramsey.

Do you love her?

Morrison looked up sharply, but Donatt was looking at him blankly. 'Yes, of course,' he said.

Have you ever had marital problems? A separation perhaps?

'What has that got to do with kicking the habit?' Morrison asked. He sounded a little dogger than he had intended, but he wanted the truth he needed - a cigarette.

A great deal, Donatt said, just bear with me.

No. Nothing like that. Although things had been a little tense just lately.

'You just have the one child?

'Yes. A boy. He's in a private school.'

And which school is it?

'That,' Morrison said grimly, 'I'm not going to tell you.'

'All right,' Donatti said, agreed. 'He smokes a lot, you know. My question: A few questions will be answered. I prefer now of your first treatment.'

'How nice,' Morrison said, and stood.

'The final question,' Donatti said. 'You haven't had a cigarette for over an hour. How do you feel?'

'Fine,' Morrison lied. 'Just fine.'

'Good for you!' Donatti exclaimed. He stepped around the desk and opened the door. 'Enjoy them tonight. A better tomorrow, you. I never smoke again.'

'Is that right?'

'Mr Morrison,' Donatti said solemnly, 'we guarantee it.'

He was sitting on the outer edge of Quitters Inc. the next day, promptly at three. He had spent most of the day swining between skipping the appointment the receptionist had made for him on the way out and going in a spirit of mischievousness. *Throw your best pitch at me, buster.*

In the end something Jimmy McLean had said convinced him to keep the appointment. *It changed my whole life.* God knew his own life could do with some changing. And then there was his own curiosity. Before going up in the elevator, he smoked a cigarette down in the lobby. Too dumb had it. It's the last one, he thought. It tasted horrible.

The wait in the outer office was shorter this time. When the receptionist led him to go in, Donatti was waiting. He offered his hand and smiled, and to Morrison the smile looked a most predatory. He began to feel a little tense and that made him want a cigarette.

'Come with me,' Donatti said, and led the way down to the small room. He sat behind the desk again, and Morrison took the other chair.

'I'm very glad you came,' Donatti said. 'A great many prospective clients never show up again after the initial interview. They discover they don't want to quit as badly as they thought. It's going to be a pleasure to work with you on this.'

When does the treatment start? Hypnosis he was thinking. It must be hypnosis.

Oh, it already has. It started when we shook hands in the hall. Do you have cigarettes with you, Mr Morrison?

'Yes.'

May I have them, please?

Shrugging, Morrison handed Donatti his pack. There were only two or three left in it anyway.

Donatti put the pack on the desk. Then, smiling into Morrison's eyes, he curled his right hand into a fist and began to hammer it down on the pack of cigarettes which twisted and flattened. A broken cigarette end flew out. Ihabacel crumbs spewed. The sound of Donatti's fist was very loud in the closed room. The smile remained in his face in spite of the force of the blows, and Morrison was chilled by it. Probably just the effect they want to inspire, he thought.

At last Donatti ceased pounding. He picked up the pack & twisted and battered ruin. You wouldn't believe the pleasure that gives me, he said, and dropped the pack into the wastebasket. Even after three years in the business, it still pleases me.'

As a treatment, it leaves something to be desired, Morrison said mildly. There's a news stand in the lobby of this very building. And they sell bananas.

As you say, Donatti said. He folded his hands. Your son, Alvin Dawes Morrison, is in the Paterson School for Handicapped Children. Born with crania, brain damage. Tested IQ of 46. Not quite in the educable retarded category. Your wife—'

How'd you find that out? Morrison barked. He was startled and angry. You've got no goddamn right to go poking around my—

We knew a lot about you, Donatti said smoothly. But, as I said, I will let the hell out in strictest confidence.

I'm getting out of here, Morrison said firmly. He stood up.

'Stay a bit longer.'

Morrison looked at him closely. Donatti wasn't upset. In fact, he looked a little amused. The face of a man who has seen this reaction scores of times—maybe hundreds.

'All right. But it better be good.'

'Oh, it is.' Donatti leaned back. 'I told you we were pragmatists here. As pragmatists, we have to start by realizing how difficult it is to cure an addiction to tobacco. The relapse rate is almost eight-five percent. The re-appeal rate for heroin addicts is lower than that. It is an extraordinary problem. *Extraordinary*'

Morrison glanced up the wastebasket. One of the cigarettes, although twisted, still looked smokeable. Donatti, always good-naturedly, reached into the wastebasket and broke it between his fingers.

State legislatures sometimes hear a request that the prison systems do away with the weekly cigarette rat. Such proposals are invariably defeated. In a few cases where they have passed, there have been fierce prison riots. *Riots*, Mr Morrison. Imagine it.

'I Morrison said, am not surprised.'

'But consider the implications. When you put a man in prison, you take away any normal, settleable. You take away his liquor, his politics, his freedom of movement. None is—or few in comparison to the number of prisons. But when you take away his cigarettes—what's ham? He slammed his fist on the desk for emphasis.'

During World War I, when no one on the German home front could get cigarettes, the sight of German aristocrats picking butts out of the gutter was a common one. During World War II, many American women turned to pipes when they were unable to obtain cigarettes. A fascinating problem for the true pragmatist, Mr Morrison.

'Could we get to the treatment?'

Momentarily. Step over here, please. Donatti had risen and was standing by the green curtains. Morrison had produced yesterday. Donatti drew the curtains, discarding a

rectangle window that looked into a bare room. No, not quite bare. There was a rabbit on the floor, eating pellets out of a dish.

Pretty bunny. Morrison commented.

Indeed. Watch him. Donatt pressed a button by the window side. The rabbit stopped eating and began to hop a bit erratically. It seemed to leap higher each time its feet struck the floor. Its fur stood up, spiky and erect. Its eyes were wild.

Stop that. You're electrocuting him!

Donatt released the button. Far from it. There's a very low-volt charge in the floor. Watch the rabbit. Mr Morrison.

The rabbit was crouched about ten feet away from the dish of pellets. His nose wriggled. All at once he hopped away into a corner.

If the rabbit gets a jolt often enough while he's eating, Donatt said, he makes the association very quickly. Eating causes pain. Therefore, he won't eat. A few more shocks, and the rabbit will starve to death in front of his food. It's called aversion training.

Light dawned in Morrison's head.

No, thanks. He started for the door.

Wait, please. Mr Morrison.

Morrison didn't pause. He grasped the doorknob and turned it so firmly through his hand. Unlock this.

Mr Morrison, I yell, I yell down.

Unlock this door or I'll have the cops on you before you can say Marboro Man.

My own. The voice was as cold as shaved ice.

Morrison looked at Donatt. His brown eyes were muddy and frightening. My God, he thought. I'm locked in here with a psycho. He licked his lips. He wanted a cigarette more than he ever had in his life.

Let me explain the treatment in more detail, Donatt said.

You don't understand, Morrison said with a counterten-

patience. I don't want the treatment. I've decided against it.

No. Mr Morrison. You're the one who doesn't understand. You don't have any choice. When I told you the treatment had already begun, I was speaking the *utter* truth. I would have thought you'd tipped to that by now.

You're crazy. Morrison said wonderingly.

No. Only a pragmatist. Let me tell you all about the treatment.

Sure. Morrison said. 'As long as you understand that as soon as I get out of here I'm going to buy five packs of cigarettes and smoke them all on the way to the police station.' He suddenly realized he was biting his thumb-nail, sucking on it, and made himself stop.

As you wish. But I think you'll change your mind when you see the whole picture.

Morrison said nothing. He sat down again and folded his hands.

For the first month of the treatment, our operatives will have you under constant supervision. Donatti said. You'll be able to spot some of them. Not all. But they'll always be with you. Always. If they see you smoke a cigarette, I get a call.'

And I suppose you bring me here and do the old rabbit trick. Morrison said. He tried to sound cold and sarcastic but he suddenly felt horribly frightened. This was a nightmare.

Oh no. Donatti said. Your wife gets the rabbit trick, not you?

Morrison looked at him dumbly.

Donatti smiled. You, he said, get to watch.

After Donatti let him out, Morrison walked for over two hours in a complete daze. It was another fine day, but he didn't notice. The monstrousness of Donatti's smiling face blotted out all else.

You see, he had said, a pragmatic problem demands

pragmatic situations. You must realize we have your best interests at heart.

Quitters, Inc., according to Donatt, was a sort of fund at the time the picture was taken. The man in the walt portrait. The gentleman had been extremely successful in several family businesses—including slot machines, massage parlors, numbers and a brisk oil-bought-and-sold-in-the-trade between New York and Turkey. Mort Three Fingers Mine I had been a heavy smoker, up in the three pack a day range. The paper he was holding in the picture was a doctor's diagnosis—lung cancer. Mort had died in 1970, after endowing Quitters, Inc., with family funds.

We try to keep as close to breaking even as possible, Donatt had said. But we're more interested in helping our fellow man. And, of course, it's a great tax angle.

The treatment was chillingly simple. A first offence and Cindy would be brought to what Donatt called the rabbit room. A second offence and Morrison would get the dose. On a third offence, both of them would be brought in together. A fourth offence would show grave desperation pitchems and would trigger sterner measures. An operative would be sent to Cindy's school to warn the boy over.

Imagine, Donatt said smirking, how horrible it will be for the boy. He wouldn't understand it even if someone explained. He doesn't know someone is hurting him because daddy was bad. He'll be very frightened.

You bastard, Morrison said, his voice thick with tears. You devil, you bastard.

Don't mind me, said Donatt. He was smiling wistfully. I know it won't happen. Forty per cent of all children have been disciplined at all, and only ten per cent have more than three fails from grace. Those are cases that I know, even I know they.

Mr. Rosen did not let them reasoning. He found them terrifying.

Please, I you training essential to me.

'What do you mean?'

Donatt beamed. The room for you and your wife, a second beating for your son and a beating for your wife.

Morrison driven beyond the point of rational consideration lunged over the desk at Donatt. Donatt moved with amazing speed for a man who had apparently been completely relaxed. He shoved the chair backwards and drove both of his feet over the desk and into Morrison's belly. Gagging and coughing, Morrison staggered backward.

'Sit down, Mr Morrison,' Donatt said benignly. 'Let's talk this over like rational men.'

When he could get his breath, Morrison did as he was told. 'Nightmares had to end sometime, didn't they?'

Quitters, Inc. Donatt had explained further, operated on a ten-step punishment scale. Steps six, seven and eight consisted of further trips to the rabbit room (and increased voltage) and more serious beatings. The ninth step would be the breaking of his son's arms.

'And the tenth?' Morrison asked, his mouth dry.

Donatt shook his head sadly. 'Then we give up, Mr Morrison. You become part of the unregenerate two per cent.'

'You ready give up?'

In a manner of speaking. He opened one of the desk drawers and laid a silenced 45 on the desk. He smiled into Morrison's eyes. But even the unregenerate two per cent never smoke again. We guarantee it.

The Friday Night Movie was *Bulldozer*, one of Cindy's favourites but after an hour of Morrison's mutterings and fidgetings her concentration was broken.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked during stated identification.

'Nothing... everything,' he growled. 'I'm giving up smoking.'

She laughed. 'Since when? Five minutes ago?'

Since three o'clock this afternoon

You really haven't had a cigarette since then?"

No, he said, and began to gnaw his thumb-nail. It was ragged down to the quick.

"That's wonderful. What ever made you decide to quit?"

You, he said. And... and Alvin.

Her eyes widened and when the movie came back on, she didn't notice. Dick rarely mentioned their retarded son. She came over, looked at the empty ashtray by his right hand, and then up at his eyes. Are you really trying to quit, Dick?

Really. And if I go to the cops, he added mentally, the local goon squad will be around to rearrange your face, Cindy.

I'm glad. Even if you don't make it, we both thank you for the thought, Dick.

Oh, I think I'll make it, he said, thinking of the muddy homicidal look that had come into Donatti's eyes when he kicked him in the stomach.

He slept badly that night, dozing in and out of sleep. Around three o'clock he woke up completely. His craving for a cigarette was like a low-grade fever. He went downstairs and to his study. The room was in the middle of the house. Now windows. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and looked in, fascinated by the cigarette box. He looked around and flicked his lips.

Constant supervision during the first month. Donatti had said eighteen hours a day during the next two—but he would never know which eighteen. During the fourth month, the month when most clients backed the service would return to twenty-four hours a day. Then twelve hours of broken surveillance each day for the rest of the year. After that? Random surveillance for the rest of the client's life.

*For the rest of his life*

We may add it to every other month, Donatti said. Or

every other day. Or constantly for one week two years from now. The point is, you won't know. If you smoke, you'll be gambling with loaded dice. Are they watching? Are they picking up my wife or sending a man after my son right now? Beautiful, isn't it? And if you do sneak a smoke in, I taste awful. It's like your son's blood.

But they could be watching now, in the dead of night in his own study. The house was grave quiet.

He looked at the cigarettes in the box for almost two minutes, unable to tear his gaze away. Then he went to the study door, peered out into the empty hall, and went back to look at the cigarettes some more. A horrific picture came into his stretching before him and not a cigarette to be found. How in the name of God was he ever going to be able to make another tough presentation to a wary client without that cigarette burning nonchalantly between his fingers as he approached the charts and layouts? How would he be able to endure City's endless garden shows without a cigarette? How could he even get up in the morning and face the day without a cigarette to smoke as he drank his coffee and read the paper?

He cursed himself for getting into this. He cursed Dorothy. And most of all, he cursed Jimmy McCann. How could he have done it? The son of a bitch has known. It's him he trembled in the desire to get hold of Jimmy Judas McCann.

Stealthily, he glanced around the study again. He reached into the drawer and brought out a cigarette. He caressed it for a moment. What was that odd's again? He found so *damn* so *damn* packed. True words had never been spoken. He put the cigarette in his mouth and then paused, cocking his head.

Had there been the slightest noise from the closet? A faint shifting? Sure, it's not. But...

Another mental image—that rabbit hopping crazily in the grapevines exactly. The thought of Candy in that room...

He listened desperately and heard nothing. He told

to myself that all he had to do was go to the closet door and yank it open. But he was too afraid of what he might find. He went back to bed but didn't sleep for a long time.

In spite of how lousy he felt in the morning, breakfast tasted good. After a moment's hesitation, he吞下了他的早餐，吞下了他惯常吃的玉米片和炒蛋。He was grumpy, washing out the pan when Cindy came downstairs in her robe.

Richard Morrison: You haven't eaten an egg for breakfast since Hector was a pup.

Morrison grunted. He considered since Hector was a pup to be one of Cindy's stupider sayings, on a par with *I should smile and kiss a pig*.

'Have you smoked yet?' she asked, pouring orange juice.

'No.'

'You'll be back on them by noon,' she proclaimed authoritatively.

'Lot of gooddamn help you are,' he rasped, rounding on her. 'You and anyone else who doesn't smoke you a pack, oh, never mind.'

He expected her to be angry, but she was looking at him with something like wonder. 'You're really serious,' she said. 'You really are.'

'You bet I am. You'll never know how serious. I hope.'

'Poor baby,' she said, going to him. 'You look like death warmed over. But I'm very proud.'

Morrison held her tightly.

Scenes from the life of Richard Morrison: October-November

Morrison and a crony from Lark in Studios at Jack Dempsey's bar. Crony offers a cigarette. Morrison grasps his glass a little more tightly and says, *I'm quitting.* Crony laughs and says, *I give you a week.*

Morrison waiting for the morning train, looking over the top of the *Times* at a young man in a blue suit. He sees the young man almost every morning now, and sometimes at

other places. At Once's where he's meeting a client  
Looking at 45s in Sam Goody's where Morrison is looking  
for a Sam Cooke album. Once is a tease some behind  
Morrison's group at the local golf course

Morrison getting drunk at a party, wanting a cigarette  
but not quite drunk enough to take one

Morrison visiting his son, bringing him a large box that  
smoked when he squeezed it. His son's substance  
heightened. Somehow not as repulsive as before. He's  
going his son's ways, learning what Donahue and his son  
knows but he's only realized before him. Love is the  
most pernicious drug of all. Let the romantics debate. Is  
cannabis pragmatists accept it and use it

Morrison using the passive compulsion to smoke. The  
box he never quite finished, passing it over, trying  
the need to have something in his mouth. Cough-ticks  
in his car, a touch pick. He's been trying the hemp

Another's Morrison hanging up in a cross-traffic jam in  
the Midtown Tunnel. Darkness. Horn-hunting. A streak  
of traffic hopefully snarled. And suddenly, thumbing  
open the glove compartment and seeing the half-open pack  
of cigarettes in there. He looked at them for a moment  
then snatched one out, lit it with the dashboard lighter.  
If anything happens, it's Cindy's fault, he told himself  
determined to let her take him to the damn cigarettes.

The first one made him cough smoke-stained furiously. The  
second made his eyes water. The third made him feel  
the heat and sweat. It astounded him how

And on the heel of that. My God, what am I doing

He snatched impatiently behind him. Ahead the traffic  
had begun to move again. He stubbed the cigarette out in  
the ashtray, opened both front windows, opened the vents  
and then turned the air, the plessy. like a kid who has just  
flashed his first butt down the aisle.

He joined the traffic flow jerkily and drove home

Can't be called. I'm home.

No answer.

Cindy: Where are you, hon?

The phone rang and he pounced on it. Hello, Cindy?

It's Mr. Morrison. Donatti said. He sounded pleasantly brisk and businesslike. It seems we have a small business matter to attend to. Would five o'clock be convenient?

Have you got my wife?

Yes, indeed. Donatti chuckled indigently.

Look, let her go. Morrison babbled. It won't happen again. It was a slip, just a slip, that's all. I only had three drags and for God's sake it didn't even taste good.

That's a shame. I count on you for five then, shall I?

Please. Morrison said, close to tears. Please.

He was speaking to a dead line.

At 5 pm, the reception room was empty except for the secretary, who gave him a twinkly smile that ignored Morrison's pallid and disheveled appearance. Mr. Donatti, she said, into the reception. Mr. Morrison to see you. She nodded to Morrison. Good night.

Donatti was waiting outside the unmarked room with a man who was wearing a simple sweatshirt and carrying a .44. He was built like an ape.

Listen, Morrison said to Donatti. We can work something out, can't we? I'll pay you. I'll.

Shaddap, the man in the simple sweatshirt said.

It's good to see you, Donatti said. Sorry it has to be under such adverse circumstances. Well, you've wished me. We'll make this as brief as possible. I can assure you your wife won't be hurt. — this, me.

Morrison forced himself to a grip at Donatti.

Come come, Donatti said, looking annoyed. It's odd, but I think here is the right pastime, whipping and you, who is still going to get it. Now where's the percolator in this?

I hope you run in hell, he told Morrison.

Donatt sighed. If I had a nickel for every time someone expressed a similar sentiment, I could retire. Let it be a lesson to you, Mr Morrison. When a romantic tries to do a good thing and fails, they give him a medal. When a pragmatist succeeds, they wish him in hell. Shall we go?

Junk must have seen the pistol.

Morrison preceded them into the room. He felt numb. The small green curtain had been pulled. Junk prodded him with the gun. This is what being a witness at the gas chamber must have been like, he thought.

He looked in. Cindy was there, looking around bewilderedly.

Cindy! Morrison called miserably. Cindy, they

She can't hear or see you, Donatt said. One way glass. Well, let's get it over with. It really was a very small slip. I believe thirty seconds should be enough, Junk!

Junk pressed the button with one hand and kept the pistol rammed firmly into Morrison's back with the other.

It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

When it was over, Donatt put a hand on Morrison's shoulder and said, Are you going to throw up?

No, Morrison said weakly. His forehead was against the glass. His legs were jelly. I don't think so. He turned around and saw that Junk was gone.

Come with me, Donatt said.

Where? Morrison asked apathetically.

I think you have a few things to explain, don't you?

How can I face her? How can I remember that?

I think you're going to be surprised, Donatt said.

The room was empty except for a sofa. Cindy was on it, sobbing helplessly.

Cindy, he said gently.

She looked up, her eyes mottled by tears. Dick? she whispered. Dick! Oh... Oh God... He held her tightly. Two men, she said against his chest. In the house

and at first I thought they were burglars and then I thought they were going to rape me and then they took me someplace with a bandtold over my eyes and and oh it was k-horrible

Shhh, he said. Shhh.

But why? she asked looking up at him. Why would they?

Because of me he said. I have to tell you a story Cindy -

When he had finished he was silent a moment and then said 'I suppose you hate me. I wouldn't blame you.'

He was looking at the floor and she took his face in both hands and turned it to hers. No, she said. I don't hate you.'

He looked at her in mute surprise.

It was worth it, she said. 'God bless these people. They've let you out of prison.'

'Do you mean that?'

Yes, she said and kissed him. 'Can we go home now? I feel much better. Ever so much.'

The phone rang one evening a week later and when Morrison recognized Donatu's voice, he said, 'Your boys have got it wrong. I haven't even been near a cigarette.'

'We know that. We have a final matter to talk over. Can you stop by tomorrow afternoon?'

'Is it -'

'No nothing serious. Book keeping really. By the way congratulations on your promotion.'

'How did you know about that?'

'We're keeping tabs.' Donatu said noncommittally and hung up.

When they entered the small room, Donatu said, Don't look so nervous. No one's going to bite you. Sit over here please.

Mr Morrison saw an ordinary bathroom scale. I step. I've gained a little weight, but

Yes, seventy-three per cent of our clients do. Step up please,

Morrison did, and tipped the scales at one seventy-four

Okay, fine. You can step off. How tall are you, Mr Morrison?

Five-eleven?

Okay, let's see. He pulled a small card laminated in plastic from his breast pocket. Well, that's not too bad. I'm going to write you a prescrip for some highly illegal diet pills. I use them sparingly and according to directions. And I'm going to set your maximum weight at... let's see. He consulted the card again. One eighty-two, how does that sound? And since this is December first, I'll expect you the first of every month for a weigh-in. No problem if you can't make it, as long as you can in advance.

And what happens if I go over one eighty-two?

Donatt snorted. We'll send someone out to your house to cut off your wife's little finger, he said. You can leave through this door, Mr Morrison. Have a nice day.

Eight months later:

Morrison runs into the ebony from the Lark Inn Studios at Dempsey's bar. Morrison is down to what Cindy proudly calls his fighting weight, one sixty-seven. He works out three times a week and looks as fit as whipcord. The ebony from Lark Inn, by comparison, looks like something the cat dragged in.

Crony. I told you, how'd you ever stop? I'm locked into this damn habit tighter than I lie. The ebony stubs his cigarette out with real relish and drains his scotch.

Morrison looks at him speculatively and then takes a small white business card out of his wallet. He pushes on the bar between them. You know, he says, these guys changed my life.

## Twelve months later:

Morrison receives a bill in the mail. The bill says

QUITTERS INC  
237 East 46th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10017

1 Treatment	\$250.00
Course for Actor Donat	\$250.00
Electricity	\$ 50
<b>TOTAL (Please pay this amount)</b>	<b>\$500.50</b>

Those sons of bitches he explodes. They charged me for the electricity they used to ~~use~~ to

Just pay it she says and kisses him

## Twenty months later:

Quite by accident Morrison and his wife meet the Jimmy McCanns at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Introductions are made all around. Jimmy looks as good if not better than he did on that day in the airport terminal so long ago. Morrison has never met his wife. She is pretty in the radiant way plain girls sometimes have when they are very, very happy.

She offers her hand and Morrison shakes it. There is something odd about her grip and halfway through the second act he realizes what it was. The little finger on her right hand is missing.

## I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

I know what you need

Elizabeth looked up from her sociology text, startled and saw a rather nondescript young man in a green fatigued jacket. For a moment she thought he looked familiar, as if she had known him before, the feeling was close to déjà vu. Then it was gone. He was about her height, skinny and twitchy. That was the word. He wasn't moving, but he seemed to be twitching inside his skin, just out of sight. His hair was black and unkempt. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes, and the lenses looked dirty. No, she was quite sure she had never seen him before.

You know, she said. I doubt that.

You need a strawberry double dip cone. Right?

She blinked at him, frank & startled. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had been thinking about breaking for an ice cream. She was studying for finals in one of the third floor carrels of the Student Union, and there was still a woefully long way to go.

Right? he persisted, and smiled. It transformed his face from something over-intense and nearly ugly into something else that was oddly appealing. The word cute occurred to her, and that wasn't a good word to affix a boy with, but this one was when he smiled. She snuck back before she could blabber behind her lips. This she didn't need to have to waste time brushing off some weirdo who had decided to pick the worst time of the year to try to make a

impression. She still had sixteen chapters of *Introduction to Sociology* to wade through.

'No thanks,' she said.

'Come on, if you hit him any harder you'll give yourself a headache. You've been at it two hours without a break.'

'How would you know that?'

'I've been watching you,' he said promptly, but this time his gaze on her was not on her. She already had a headache.

'Well, you can stop,' she said, more sharply than she had intended. 'I don't like people staring at me.'

'I'm sorry.' She felt a little sorry for him, the way she sometimes felt sorry for stray dogs. He seemed to flail in the green fatigue jacket and... yes, he had on mismatched socks. One black, one brown. She let herself get him ready to leave again and he did back.

'I've got these things,' she said gently.

'Sure,' he said. 'Okay.'

She looked after him for a moment pensively. Then she lowered her gaze to her book, but an after-image of the encounter remained, *strawberry blonde hair*.

When she got back to the dorm it was 11:15 p.m. and Alice was stretched out on her bed, listening to Neil Diamond and reading *The Story of O*.

'I didn't know they ass good that in Eh?' Elizabeth said.

Alice sat up. Breaching my horizons, daring. Spreading my intellectual wings. Raising my... L?'

'Hmmm?'

'Did you hear what I said?'

'No, sorry, I -'

'You look like somebody corked you one, kid.'

'I met a guy tonight. Sort of a funny guy, at that.'

'Oh? He must be something if he can separate the great Rogan from her beloved texts.'

'His name's Edward Jackson Harner, Junior, no less. Short, skinny. Looks like he washed his hair around

Washington's birthday. Oh, and mismatched socks. One black, one brown.'

I thought you were more the fraternity type

'It's nothing like that. Alice [was studying at the Union on the third floor - the Think Tank - and he invited me down to the Canteen for an ice-cream cone. I told him no and he sort of slunk off. But once he started me thinking about ice-cream I couldn't stop. I didn't decide to give up and take a break and there he was, holding a big, drippy strawberry, double dip in each hand.]

I tremble to hear the denouement

Ezabeth snorted. 'Well, I couldn't really say no. So he sat down and it turns out he had sociology with Professor Branner last year.'

W.L. wonders never cease. 'Held a merrily Goshen to Christmas -'

Listen, this is really amazing. You know the way I've been sweating this course?

Yes. You talk about it in your sleep practically.

'I've got a seventy-eight average. I've got to have an eighty to keep my scholarship and that means I need at least an eighty-four on the final. Well, this Ed Hamner says Branner uses almost the same final every year. And Ed's eidetic.'

You mean he's got a whatzit photographic memory?

'Yes. Look at this. She opened her sociology book and took out three sheets of notebook paper covered with writing.'

Alice took them. 'This looks like multiple-choice stuff.'

'It is. Ed says it's Branner's last year's final word for word.'

Alice said flatly. 'I don't believe it.'

'But it covers all the material.'

'S, I, don't believe it.' She handed the sheets back. 'Just because this speaks -'

He isn't a spook. Don't call him that.

Okay. This little guy hasn't got you bamboozled into just memorizing this and not studying at all, has he?

Of course not, she said uneasily.

'And even if this is like the exam, do you think it's exactly ethical?'

Anger surprised her and ran away with her tongue before she could hold it. That's great for you, sure. Dean's List every semester and your folks paving your way. You aren't.

Hey, I'm sorry. There was no call for that.

Ance shrugged and opened O again, her face carefully neutral. No, you're right. Not my business. But why don't you study the book, too? Just to be safe?

'Of course I will.'

But mostly she studied the exam notes provided by Edward Jackson Hamner Jr.

When she came out of the lecture hall after the exam he was sitting in the lobby, floating in his green army fatigue coat. He smiled tentatively at her and stood up. How'd it go?

Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. She could not remember such a blessed feeling of relief. I think I aced it.

'Really? That's great. Like a burger.'

'Love one,' she said absently. Her mind was still on the exam. It was the one Ed had given her, almost word for word, and she had sailed through.

Over hamburgers, she asked him how his own finals were going.

'Don't have any. I'm on Honours, and you don't take them unless you want to. I was doing okay, so I didn't.'

'Then why are you still here?'

'I had to see how you did. Didn't I?'

I did, you didn't. That's sweet, but... The naked look in his eyes troubled her. She had seen it before. She was a pretty girl.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'Yes, I did.'

Ed I'm grateful I think you saved my scholarship. I really do. But I have a boy-friend you know

'Serious?' he asked, with a poor attempt to speak lightly

'Very,' she said, matching his tone. 'Almost engaged.'

'Does he know he's lucky?' Does he know how lucky?

I'm lucky, too, she said, thinking of Tony Lombard

'Beth,' he said suddenly

'What?' she asked, startled

'Nobody calls you that, do they?'

'Why... do No, they don't

'Not even this guy?'

'No.' Tony called her Liz. Sometimes Lizzie which was even worse

He leaned forward. But Beth is what you like best isn't it?

She laughed to cover her confusion. Whatever in the world -

'Never mind.' He grinned his gamine grin. I'll call you Beth. That's better. Now eat your hamburger.

Then her junior year was over and she was saying goodbye to Alice. They were a little stiff together and Elizabeth was sorry. She supposed it was her own fault she had crowed a little loudly about her sociology final when grades were posted. She had scored a ninety-seven, highest in the division.

Well, she told herself as she waited at the airport for her flight to be called, it wasn't any more unethical than the cramming she had been resigned to in that third-floor carre. Cramming wasn't real studying at all, just rote memorization that faded away to nothing as soon as the exam was over.

She fingered the envelope that poked out of her purse. Notice of her scholarship-loan package for her senior year: two thousand dollars. She and Tony would be working together in Boothbay Maine this summer and the money she would earn there would put her over the top. And

thanks to Ed Hammer, it was going to be a beau fu. summer Clear sailing all the way

But I was the most miserab e summer of her life

Jane was rainy the gas shortage depressed the carnt trade and her tips at the Bocahay Inn were mea more even worse Tony was pressing her on the subject of marr age He cou & get a job on or near campus he said and with her Student Aid grant she could get her degree in style She was surprised to find that the idea scared rather than pleased her

Something was wrong

She didn't know what, but someth ng was missing out of whack out of kilter One night late in July she frightened herself by going on a hysterical crying jag in her apartment The only good thing about it was that her room mate a mousy little girl named Sandra Ackerman was out on a date

The nightmare came in ear y August She was lying in the bottom of an open grave, unable to move Rain fell from a white sky on to her upturned face Then Tony was standing over her wearing his yellow high-impact construction he met

Marry me, Liz he said looking down at her expressionlessly Marry me or else \*

She tried to speak to agree, she wou d do anything if only he would take her out of this dreadful muddy hole But she was paralyzed

'All right' he said It's or else then

He went away She struggled to break out of her paralysis and couldn't

Then she heard the bulldozer

A moment later she saw it a bright yellow monster pushing a mound of wet earth in front of the blade Tony's mere less face looked down from the open cab

He was going to bury her alive

Trapped in her most unless voice ass budy she could

only watch in dumb horror. Traces of dirt began to run down the sides of the hole.

A faint far voice cried, 'Go! Leave her now! Go!'

Tony stumbled down from the balcony and ran.

Huge relief swept her. She would have cried had she been able. And her saviour appeared, standing at the foot of the open grave like a sexton. It was Ed Hammer, floating in his green fatigue jacket, his hair awry, his horns rms slipped down to the small bulge at the end of his nose. He held his hand out to her.

'Get up,' he said gently. 'I know what you need. Get up, Beth.'

And she could get up. She sobbed with relief. She tried to thank him, her words spilling out on top of each other. And Ed only smiled gently and nodded. She took his hand and looked down to see her footing. And when she looked up again, she was holding the paw of a huge, snarling timber wolf with red hurricane-lartern eyes and thick, spiked teeth open to bite.

She woke up sitting bolt upright in bed, her nightgown drenched with sweat. Her body was shaking uncontrollably. And even after a warm shower and a glass of milk, she could not reconcile herself to the dark. She slept with the light on.

A week later Tony was dead.

She opened the door in her robe, expecting to see Tony, but it was Danny Kimer, one of the fellows he worked with. Danny was a fun guy, she and Tony had doubled with him and his girl a couple of times. But standing in the doorway of her second-floor apartment, Danny looked not only serious but...

'Danny?' she said. 'What?'

'Liz,' he said. 'Liz, you've got to hold on to yourself. You've...oh, God.' He pounded the jamb of the door with one big knuckled, dirty hand, and she saw he was crying.

Danny sat down? Is something

Tom's dead? Danny said. He was. But he was talking to air. She had fainted.

The next week passed in a kind of dream. The story pieced itself together from the word's a brief newspaper account and from what Danny told her over a beer in the Hamer Inn.

They had been repairing old Roger's vehicles on Route 16. Part of the road was gravel and Tony was flapping traffic. A car, trying to get through, checked coming down the hill. Tony had stopped him but the car never even slowed. Tony had to be pushing hard to a sudden stop and there was no place to put his back. He knew the car had a stalled headlight on the back left. He was hysterical and also a lunatic. The police tried several holes in his brake lines as if they had ever been found been melted through his driving record was A-1. He had simply been another step older. Tony had been a victim of that most of automobile mishaps an hinges accident.

Her shock and depression were increased by guilt. The last hour or so of her hours she decisions on what to do about Tony. An old sick seen a part. She was glad it was so. Because she had wanted to marry Tony — no since the night of her dream.

She broke down the way before she went home.

She was sitting on a rock outcropping by herself and after an hour or so the tears came. They surprise her with their fury. She cried until her stomach hurt and her head ached and when the tears passed she felt no better but at least she had an empty.

And that was when Ed Hamner said Beth.

She jerked around her mouth filled with the copper taste of tears but expecting to see the snarling wolf of her dream but it was only Ed Hamner looking sunburned and

strangely defenceless without his fatigue jacket and blue jeans. He was wearing red shorts that stopped just ahead of his bony knees, a white T-shirt that billowed on his thin chest like a loose sail in the ocean breeze and rubber thongs. He wasn't smiling and the fierce sun glitter on his glasses made it impossible to see his eyes.

"Ed?" she said tentatively. half convinced that this was some grief-induced hallucination. Is that really

"Yes, it's me."

How

I've been working at the Lakewood Theatre in Skowhegan. I ran into your room-mate. Alice is that her name?

"Yes.

She told me what happened. I came right away. Poor Beth. He moved his head only a degree or so but the sun glare slid off his glasses and she saw nothing wolfish nothing predatory but only a calm, warm sympathy.

She began to weep again and staggered a little with the unexpected force of it. Then he was holding her and then it was all right.

They had dinner at the Lent Woman in Waterville which was twenty-five miles away, maybe exactly the distance she needed. They went in Ed's car, a new Corvette and he drove well, neither showily nor fussily as she guessed he might. She didn't want to talk and she didn't want to be cheered up. He seemed to know it and played quiet music on the radio.

And he ordered without consulting her, seafood. She thought she wasn't hungry but when the food came she felt too ravenously.

When she looked up again her plate was empty and she laughed nervously. Ed was smoking a cigarette and watching her.

The grieving damsel ate a hearty meal, she said. "You must think I'm awful."

'No,' he said. 'You've been through a lot and you need to get your strength back. It's like being sick, isn't it?'

'Yes. Just like that.'

He took her hand across the table, squeezed it briefly, then let it go. 'But now it's recuperation time, Beth.'

'Is it? Is it really?'

'Yes,' he said. 'So tell me. What are your plans?'

'I'm going home tomorrow. After that, I don't know.'

'You're going back to school, aren't you?'

'I just don't know. After this, it seems so... so trivial. A lot of the purpose seems to have gone out of it. And all the fun.'

'It'll come back. That's hard for you to believe now, but it's true. Try it for six weeks and see. You've got nothing better to do.' The last seemed a question.

'That's true, I guess. But... Can I have a cigarette?'

'Sure. They're menthol, though. Sorry.'

She took one. 'How did you know I didn't like menthol cigarettes?'

He shrugged. 'You just don't look like one of those, I guess.'

She snorted. 'You're funny. Do you know that?'

He smiled neutrally.

'No, really. For you of all people to turn up... I thought I didn't want to see anyone. But I'm really glad it was you, Ed.'

'Sometimes it's nice to be with someone you're not involved with.'

'That's it, I guess.' She paused. 'Who are you, Ed, besides my fairy godfather? Who are you really?' It was suddenly important to her that she knew.

He shrugged. 'Nobody much. Just one of the sort of funny-looking guys you see creeping around campus with a load of books under one arm.'

'Ed, you're not funny-looking.'

'Sure I am,' he said, and snorted. 'Never grew out the way out of my high school acne, never got rushed by a big frat.'

never made any kind of splash in the social whirl. Just a dorm rat making grades that's all. When the big corporations interview on campus next spring, I I probably's go on with one of them and Ed Hamner will disappear for ever.

That would be a great shame, she said softly.

He smiled and it was a very peculiar smile. Almost bitter.

'What about your folks?' she asked. 'Where you live what you like to do.'

Another time, he said. 'I want to get you back. You've got a long plane ride tomorrow and a lot of hassles.'

The evening left her relaxed for the first time since Tony's death without that feeling that somewhere inside a mainspring was being wound and wound to the breaking point. She thought sleep would come easily but it did not.

Little questions nagged.

*Alice told me... poor Beth*

But Alice was summering in Kittery, eighty miles from Skowhegan. She must have been at Lakewood for a play.

The Corvette this year's mode. Expensive. A backstage job at Lakewood hadn't paid for that. Were his parents rich?

He had ordered just what she would have ordered herself. Maybe the only thing on the menu she would have eaten enough of to discover that she was hungry.

The menthe cigarettes the way he had kissed her going night, exactly as she had wanted to be kissed. And

*I have got a long plane ride tomorrow*

He knew she was going home because she had told him. But how had he known she was going by plane? Or that it was a long ride?

It bothered her. It bothered her because she was halfway to being in love with Ed Hamner.

*I know what you need*

Like the voice of a submarine captain telling off a thoughtless

the words he had greeted her with to lured her down to sleep.

He didn't come to the tiny Augusta airport to see her off and waiting for the plane she was surprised by her own disappointment. She was thinking about how quickly you could grow to depend on a person, almost like a uncle with a habit. The type that knows that he can take this stuff or leave it, when really -

Elizabeth began the PA blared. Please pick up the white courtesy phone.

She turned to it. And his voice said. Beth.

Ed! It's good to hear you. I thought maybe

That I'd meet you. He laughed. You don't need me for that. You're a big strong girl. Beaurea, too. You can handle this. Will I see you at school?

'E... yes, I think so.'

Good. There was a moment of silence. Then he said. Because I love you. I have from the first time I saw you.

Her tongue was stuck. She couldn't speak. A thousand thoughts whirled through her mind.

He laughed again gently. No, don't say anything. Not now. I'll see you. There. The time then. All the time in the world. Good trip, Beth. Goodbye.

And he was gone, leaving her with a white phone in her hand and her own chaotic thoughts and questions.

## September

Elizabeth picked up the old pattern of school and classes like a woman who has been interrupted at knitting. She was rooming with Alice again, of course, they had been roomies since freshman year when they had been thrown together by the housing department computer. They had always got along well, despite differing interests and personalities. Alice was the studious one, a chemistry major with a 3.8 average. Elizabeth was more social, less bookish, with a speech major in education and math

They'd got on well, but a faint coolness seemed to have grown up between them over the summer. Elizabeth chalked it up to the difference of opinion over the sociology final, and didn't mention it.

The events of the summer began to seem dreamlike. In a funny way, it sometimes seemed that Tony might have been a boy she had known in high school. It still hurt to think about him, and she avoided the subject with Alice, but the hurt was an old bruise throb and not the bright pain of an open wound.

What hurt more was Ed Hamner's failure to call.

A week passed, then two, then it was October. She got a student directory from the Union and looked up his name. It was no help; after his name were only the words Mid St. And Mid was a very long street indeed. And so she waited, and when she was called for dates, which was often, she turned them down. Alice raised her eyebrows but said nothing; she was buried alive in a six-week biochem project and spent most of her evenings at the library. Elizabeth had not read the long white envelopes that her roommate was receiving once or twice a week in the mail — since she was usually back from class first but thought nothing of them. The private detective agency was discreet; it did not print its return address on its envelopes.

When the intercom buzzed, Alice was studying. You get it, Liz. Probably for you anyway.

Elizabeth went to the intercom. "Yes?"

General door-call at Liz.

Oh, Lord.

Who is it? she asked, annoyed, and ran through her latened stack of excuses. Migraine headache. She hadn't used that one this week.

The desk girl said, amused. His name is Edward Jackson Hamner *Junior*, no less. Her voice lowered. His socks don't match.

Elizabeth shrank back to the collar of her robe. Oh, God.

If I him I'll be right down. No, if I him it'll be just a minute. No, a couple of minutes okay?

Sure, the voice said dubiously. Don't have a haemorrhage.'

Elizabeth took a pair of socks out of her closet. Took out a short denim skirt. Felt the curlers in her hair and groaned. Began to unknot them. but

Alice watched all this curiously without speaking, but she looked speculatively at the door for a long time after Elizabeth had left.

He looked just the same, he hadn't changed at all. He was wearing his green tangie jacket, and it still looked at least two sizes too big. One of the bows of his horn rimmed glasses had been mended with electrician's tape. His jeans looked new and stiff, miles from the soft and faded look that Tony had achieved effortlessly. He was wearing one green sock, one brown sock.

And she knew she loved him.

'Why didn't you call before?' she asked, going to him.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and grappled shyly. I thought I'd give you some time to date and meet some guys. I figure out what you want.

'I think I know that.'

'Good. Would you like to go to a movie?

'Anything,' she said. 'Anything at all.'

As the days passed it occurred to her that she had never met anyone, male or female, that seemed to understand her moods and needs so completely or so wordlessly. Their tastes coincided. While Tony had enjoyed the comedies of the *Goldfarber* type, Ed seemed more into comedies or non-violent dramas. He took her to the circus one night when she was feeling low and they had a hilarious wender at home. Study dates were real study dates, not just an excuse to grape on the *Third Floor* of the Union. He took her to dances and seemed especially good at the waltzes.

which she loved. They won a fifties Stroll trophy at a Homecoming Nostalgia Dance. More important, he seemed to understand when she wanted to be passionate. He didn't force her or hurry her, she never got the feeling that she had with some of the other boys she had gone out with that there was an inner time table for sex. beginning with a kiss good night on Date 1 and ending with a night in some friend's borrowed apartment on Date 10. The Mill Street apartment was Ed's excuse, a third-floor walk-up. They went there often, and Elizabeth went without the feeling that she was walking into some minor-league Don Juan's passion pit. He didn't push. He honestly seemed to want what she wanted when she wanted it. And things progressed.

When school reconvened following the semester break, Alice seemed strange & preoccupied. Several times that afternoon before Ed came to pick her up, they were going out to dinner - Elizabeth looked up to see her room mate frowning down at a large manila envelope on her desk. Once Elizabeth almost asked about it, then decided not to. Some new project probably.

It was snowing hard when Ed brought her back to the dorm. "Tomorrow?" he asked. "My place?"

"Sure. I'll make some popcorn."

"Great," he said, and kissed her. "I love you, Beth."

"Love you, too."

"Would you like to stay over?" Ed asked evenly. "Tomorrow night?"

"All night, Ed." She looked into his eyes. "Whatever you want."

"Good," he said quietly. "Sleep well, I did."

"You, too."

She expected that Alice would be asleep and entered the room quietly, but Alice was up and sitting at her desk.

"Alice, are you okay?"

I have to talk to you, Liz. About Ed.

'What about him?'

Alice was a career girl. I think that when I finish talking to you we're not going to be friends any more. For me, that's giving up a lot. So I want you to listen carefully.

Then maybe you better not say anything.

'I have to try.'

Elizabeth let her initial curiosity kindle into anger. Have you been snooping around Ed?

Alice only looked at her.

'Were you jealous of us?'

No. I'd been jealous of you and your dates. I would have moved out two years ago.

Elizabeth looked at her, perplexed. She knew what Alice said was the truth. And she suddenly felt afraid.

Two things made me wonder about Ed Hamner, Alice said. First, you wrote me about Tony's death and said how lucky it was that I'd seen Ed at the Lakewood Theatre, how he came right over to Boothbay and really helped you out. But I never saw him, Liz. I was never near the Lakewood Theatre last summer.

But...

But how did he know Tony was dead? I have no idea. I only know he didn't get it from me. The other thing was that...etic memory business. My God, Liz, he can't even remember which socks he's got on.

That's a different thing altogether, Liz said shilly.

Ed Hamner was in Las Vegas last summer, Alice said softly. He came back in mid-July and took a room in Pemiquid. That's just across the Boothbay Harbour to Wiscasset. Almost as if he were waiting for you to need him.

That's crazy! And how would you know Ed was in Las Vegas?

I ran into Shirley O'Anton just before school started. She worked in the Piney Restaurant, which is just across from the playhouse. She said she never saw anybody who

looked like Ed Hamner. So I've known he's been lying to you about several things. And so I went to my father and laid it out and he gave me the go-ahead.

'To do what?' Elizabeth asked, bewildered.

'To hire a private detective agency.'

Elizabeth was on her feet. No more Alice. That's it! She would catch the bus into town, spend tonight at Ed's apartment. She had only been waiting for him to ask her anyway.

'At least know.' Alice said. 'Then make your own decision.'

'I don't have to know anything except he's kind and good and—'

'Love is blind, huh?' Alice said, and smiled bitterly. 'Well, maybe I happen to love you a little, Liz. Have you ever thought of that?'

Elizabeth turned and looked at her for a long moment. If you do, you've got a funny way of showing it, she said. 'Go on, then. Maybe you're right. Maybe I owe you that much. Go on.'

'You knew him a long time ago,' Alice said quietly.

'I...what?'

P.S. 119, Bridgeport, Connecticut

Elizabeth was struck dumb. She and her parents had lived in Bridgeport for six years, moving to their present home the year after she had finished the second grade. She had gone to P.S. 119, but—

'Alice, are you sure?'

'Do you remember him?'

'No, of course not.' But she did remember the feeling she'd had the first time she had seen Ed—the feeling of déjà vu.

'The pretty ones never remember the ugly ducklings, I guess. Maybe he had a crush on you. You were in the first grade with him, Liz. Maybe he sat in the back of the room and just...watched you. Or on the playground. Just a little nothing kid who already wore glasses and probably

braces and you can't even remember him, but I bet he remembers you."

Elizabeth said, "What else?"

The agency freed him from school interrogations. After that it was just a matter of finding people and talking to them. The operative assigned to the case said he couldn't understand some of what he was getting. Neither did I. Some of it's scary."

"It better be," Elizabeth said grimly.

Ed Hammer Sr. was a compulsive gambler. He worked for a top-line advertising agency in New York and then moved to Bridgeport sort of on the run. The operative says that almost every big money power game and high priced book in the city was hearing his markers.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. These people really saw you get a full measure in art for your dollar, didn't they?

Maybe. Anyway, Ed's father got in another jam in Bridgeport. It was gambling again, but this time he got mixed up with a big time loan shark. He got a broken leg and a broken arm somehow. The operative says he doubts it was an accident.

"Anything else?" Elizabeth asked. "Child beating, Embezzlement?"

He ended a job with a top-line Los Angeles ad agency in 1962. That was a little too close to Las Vegas. He started to spend his weekends there, gambling heavily and losing. Then he started taking Ed Junior with him. And he started to win.

"You're making all of this up. You must be."

A ice tapped the reporter from either a wall here. For some of I was upstanding, but the operative says none of the people he talked with would have a reason to lie. Ed's father called Ed his "good luck charm." At first no body objected to the boy even though it was illegal for him to be in the casinos. His father was a prize fish. But then the father started sucking just to roulette, playing only odd even and red black. By the end of the year the boy was

off units in every casino on the strip. And his father took up a new kind of gambling

'What?'

'The stock market. When the Hammers moved to L.A. in the middle of 1961 they were living in a ninety-dollar-a-month cheese box and Mr Hammer was driving a '52 Chevrolet. At the end of 1962, just sixteen months later, he had quit his job and they were living in their own home in San Jose. Mr Hammer was driving a brand-new Thunderbird and Mrs Hammer had a Volkswagen. You see, it's against the law for a small boy to be in the Nevada casinos but no one could take the stock market page away from him.'

'Are you implying that Ed... that he could... Alice, you're crazy.'

'I'm not implying anything. I guess maybe just that he knew what his dad'd needed.'

*I know what you need.*

It was almost as if the words had been spoken into her ear and she shuddered.

Mrs Hammer spent the next six years in and out of various mental institutions. Supposedly for nervous disorders but the operative talked to an orderly who said she was pretty close to psychotic. She claimed her son was her devil's henchman. She stabbed him with a pair of scissors in 1964. Tried to kill him. She... I z? Liz, what is it?

'The scar,' she muttered. 'We were swimming at the University pool on an open night about a month ago. He's got a deep dimpled scar on his shoulder... here.' She put her hand just above her left breast. He said... A wave of nausea tried to climb up her throat and she had to wait for it to recede before she could go on. He said he fell on a picket fence when he was a little boy.

*'Shall I go on?'*

Finish why not? What can it hurt now?

His mother was released from a very plush mental institution in the San Joaquin Valley in 1968. The three of

them went on a vacation. They stopped at a picnic spot on Route 66. The boy was collecting firewood when she drove the car right over the edge of the drop-off above the ocean with both her and her husband in it. It might have been an attempt to run Ed down. By then he was nearly eighteen. His father left him a million dollar stock port to a. Ed came east a year and a half later and ended here. And that's the end.

No more skeletons in the closet?

Liz, aren't there enough?

She got up. No wonder he never wants to mention his family. But you had to dig up the corpse, didn't you?

You're blind. Alice said. Elizabeth was putting on her coat. I suppose you're going to him.

'Right.'

Because you love him.

Right.'

Alice crossed the room and grabbed her arm. Well you get that sulky, petulant look off your face for a second and think! Ed Hamner is able to do things the rest of us only dream about. He got his father a stake at roulette and made him rich playing the stock market. He seems to be able to win at winning. Maybe he's some kind of low grade psychic. Maybe he's got precognition. I don't know. There are people who seem to have a dose of that. Liz, hasn't it ever occurred to you that he's forced you to love him?

Liz turned to her slowly. I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life!

Is it? He gave you that sucker test the same way he gave his father the right side of the roulette board. He was never enrolled in any sociology course! I checked. He did it because it was the only way he could make you take him seriously!

Stop it! Liz cried. She clapped her hands over her ears.

He knew the test. And he knew when Tony was killed and he knew who were going home on a plane. He even

knew just the right psychological moment to step back into your life last October.

Elizabeth pulled away from her and opened the door.  
Please, Alice said. Please, Liz, listen. I don't know how he can do those things. I doubt if even he knows for sure. He might not mean to do you any harm, but he already has. He's made you love him by knowing every secret thing you want and need, and that's not love at all. That's rape.

Elizabeth slammed the door and ran down the stairs.

She caught the last bus of the evening into town. It was snowing more heavily than ever, and the bus lumbered through the drifts that had blown across the road like a crippled beetle. Elizabeth sat in the back, one of only six or seven passengers, a thousand thoughts in her mind.

Menho figures. The stock exchange. The way he had known her mother's nickname was Dee-Dee. A little boy sitting at the back of a first grade classroom, making sheep's eyes at a vivacious little girl, too young to understand that.

*I know what you need.*

*No. No. No. I do love him!*

Did she? Or was she simply delighted at being with someone who always ordered the right thing, took her to the right movie, and did not want to go anywhere or do anything she didn't? Was he just a kind of psychic mirror, showing her only what she wanted to see? The presents he gave her were always the right presents. When the weather had turned suddenly cold and she had been longing for a hair dryer, who gave her one? Ed Hammer, of course. Just happened to see one on sale in Days, he had said. She, of course, had been delighted.

*That's not love at all. That's rape.*

The wind clawed at her face as she stepped out on the corner of Main and M.L. on the white flag of dusk as the bus drew away with a smooth noise, grew as far lights

twinkled briefly in the snowy night for a moment and were gone.

*She had never felt so lonely in her life*

**He wasn't home**

She stood outside his door after five minutes of knocking unanswerable. It occurred to her that she had no idea what Ed or whom he saw when he wasn't with her. The subject had never come up.

*Maybe he's raising the price of another hair dryer in a poker game.*

With sudden decision she stood on her toes and felt along the top of the door knob for the spare key she knew he kept there. Her fingers stumbled over it and it fell to the hard floor with a clink.

*She picked it up and used it in the lock.*

The apartment looked different with Ed gone - art here all like a stage set. It had often amused her that someone who cared so little about his personal appearance should have such a neat, picture book, decor. Almost as if he had decorated it for her and not himself. But of course that was crazy. Wasn't it?

It occurred to her again, as for the first time, how much she liked the chair she sat in when they studied or watched TV. It was just right, the way Baby Bear's chair had been for Goldilocks. Not too hard, nor too soft. Just right. Like everything else she associated with Ed.

There were two doors opening off the living room. One went to the kitchenette, the other to his bedroom.

The wind whistled easily, making the old apartment building creak and settle.

In the bedroom, she stared at the brass bed. It looked neither too hard nor too soft, but just right. An insidious voice sparked. *It's almost too perfect, isn't it?*

She went to the bookcase and ran her eye aimlessly over the titles. One jumped at her eyes and she pulled it out. *Dance Crayons for Babies*. The book opened suddenly to a

part some three-quarters through. A section titled *The Stroll* had been circled heavily in red grease pencil and in the margin the word *BETH* had been written in large almost accusatory letters.

I ought to go now, she told herself. I can still save something. If he came back now I could never look him in the face again and Alice would win. Then she'd really get her money's worth.

But she couldn't stop and knew it. Things had gone too far.

She went to the closet and turned the knob, but it didn't give. Locked.

On the off chance she stood on tiptoe again and felt along the top of the door. And her fingers felt a key. She took it down and somewhere inside a voice said very clearly, *Don't do this.* She thought of Bucbeard's wife and what she had found when she opened the wrong door. But it was indeed too late. If she didn't proceed now she would always wonder. She opened the closet.

And had the strangest feeling that this was where the real Ed Hammer Jr. had been hiding all the time.

The closet was a mess - a jumbled rickrack of clothes buckets, an unstrung tennis racket, a pair of tattered tennis shoes, old dreams and reports tossed helter skelter, a spilted pouch of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. His green fatigue jacket had been flung in the far corner.

She picked up one of the books and hunkered at the title. *The Golden Bough*. *Another Ancient Root Modern Mysteries*. *Another Haitian Hoodoo*. And a last one bound in old, cracked leather, the title almost rubbed off the binding by much handling, smelling vague & like rotted fish. *Necronomicon*. She opened it at random, gasped, and flung it away, the obscenity still hanging before her eyes.

More to regain her composure than anything else, she reached for the green fatigue jacket, not admitting to herself that she meant to go through its pockets. But as she did it she saw something else. A small tin box.

Curiously she picked it up and turned it over in her hands, hearing things rattling inside. It was the kind of box a young boy might choose to keep his treasures in. Stamped in raised letters on the tin box stem were the words: Bridgeport Canary Co. She opened it.

The doll was on top. The Elizabeth doll.

She looked at it and began to shudder.

The doll was dressed in a scrap of red nylon, part of a skirt she had lost two or three months back. At a movie with Eu. The arms were pipe cleaners that had been draped in stuff that looked like blue moss. Graveyard moss perhaps. There was hair on the doll's head, but that was wrong. It was fine white flax, taped to the doll's pink gum eraser head. Her own hair was sandy blonde and coarser than this. This was more the way her hair had been —

*When she had been a little girl*

She swallowed and there was a clicking in her throat. Hadn't they all been issued scissors in the first grade, tiny scissors with rounded blade, just right for a child's hand. Had that long ago little boy crept up behind her, perhaps at nap time, and —

Elizabeth put the drill aside and looked in the box again. There was a blue paper check with a strange six-sided pattern drawn on it in red ink. A tattered newspaper obituary. Mr. and Mrs. Edward Flanner. The two of them seemed meaningless, out of the accompanying photo, and she saw that the same six-sided pattern had been drawn across their faces, this time in black ink, like a pall. Two more dolls, one male, one female. The similarity to the faces in the obituary photograph wasundeniably striking.

And something else.

She fumbled it out, and her fingers shook so badly she almost dropped it. A tiny sound escaped her.

It was a model car, the sort small boys buy in drugstores and hobby shops and then assemble with airplane glue. This one was a Fiat. It had been painted red. And a piece of

what looked like one of Tony's shirts had been taped to the front.

She turned the model car upside down. Someone had hammered the underside to fragments.

So you found it, you ungrateful bitch.

She screamed and dropped the car and the box. His foul treasures sprayed across the floor.

He was standing in the doorway, looking at her. She had never seen such a look of hate on a human face.

She said, You killed Tony.

He grinned unpleasantly. Do you think you could prove it?

It doesn't matter, she said, surprised at the steadiness of her own voice. I know. And I never want to see you again. Ever. And if you do... anything... to anyone else. I... know. And I'll fix you. Somehow.

His face twisted. That's the thanks I get. I gave you everything you ever wanted. Things no other man could have. Admit it. I made you perfectly happy.

You killed Tony! She screamed it at him.

He took another step into the room. Yes, and I did it for you. And what are you, Beth? You don't know what love is. I loved you from the first time I saw you, over seventeen years ago. Could Tiny say that? It's never been hard for you. You're pretty. You never had to think about wanting or needing or about being lonely. You never had to find other ways to get the things you had to have. There was always a Tiny to give them to you. All you ever had to do was smile and say please. His voice rose a note. I could never get what I wanted that way. Don't you think I tried? It didn't work with my father. He just wanted more and more. He never even kissed me good night or gave me a hug until I made him rich. And my mother was the same way. I gave her her marriage back, but was that enough for her? She hated me! She would n't come near me! She said I was unnatural. I gave her nice things but... Beth, don't do that! Don't... dooon't...<sup>+</sup>

She stepped on the Elizabeth doll and crashed it, fath'ng her heel on it. Something inside her flared in agony and then was gone. She wasn't afraid of him now. He was just a small, shrunken boy in a young man's body. And his socks didn't match.

"I don't think you can do anything to me now. Ed," she told him. "Not now. Am I wrong?"

He turned from her. "Go on," he said weakly. "Get out. But leave my box. At least do that."

"I leave the box. But not the things in it." She walked past him. His shoulders twitched, as if he might turn and try to grab her, but then they stopped.

As she reached the second floor landing, he came to the top of the stairs and called shakily after her. "Go on then. But you'll never be satisfied with any man after me! And when your looks go, and then stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me. You think I what you threw away?"

She went down the stairs and out into the snow. Its coldness felt good against her face. It was a two-mile walk back to the campus, but she didn't care. She wanted the walk, wanted the cold. She wanted it to make her clean.

In a queer, twisted way she felt sorry for him. A little boy with a huge power crammed inside a wretched spirit. A little boy who tried to make humans behave like toy soldiers and then stamped on them in a fit of temper when they wouldn't or when they found out.

And what was she? Biesen! with all the things he was not through no fault of his or effort of her own. She remembered the way she had reacted to Alice. Using hands and jealousy to hold on to something that was easy rather than good, or caring, or caring.

*When your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me. — I know what you need.*

But was she so small that she actually needed so little? Please, dear God, no.

On the bridge between the campus and town she paused  
and threw Ed Hamner's scraps of magic over the side, piece  
by piece. The red-painted mode. Flat went last, falling end  
over end into the driven snow drift. It was lost from sight.  
Then she walked on.

## CHILDREN OF THE CORN

Burt turned the radio on too loud and didn't turn it down because they were on the verge of another argument and he didn't want it to happen. He was desperate for it not to happen.

Vicky said something.

'What?' he shouted.

'Turn it down! Do you want to break my eardrums?'

He bit down hard on what might have come through his mouth and turned it down.

Vicky was fanning herself with her scarf even though the T-Bird was air conditioned. 'Where are we anyway?'

'Nebraska.'

She gave him a cold, neutral look. 'Yes, Burt. I know we're in Nebraska, Burt. But where the hell are we?'

'You've got the road atlas. Look it up. Or can't you read?'

'Such wit. This is why we got off the turnpike. So we could look at three hundred miles of corn. And enjoy the wit and wisdom of Burt Robeson.'

He was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. He decided he was holding it that tightly because if he loosened up, why, one of those hands might just fly off and hit the ex Prom Queen beside him right in the chops. 'We're saving our marriage,' he told himself. Yes. We're doing it the same way us grunts went about saving villages in the war.

'Vicky,' he said carefully. 'I have driven fifteen hundred

miles on turnpikes since we left Boston. I did all that driving myself because you refused to drive. Then

"I did not refuse!" Vicky said hotly. Just because I get migraines when I drive for a long time.

"Then when I asked you if you'd navigate for me on some of the secondary roads, you said sure. Burt. Those were your exact words. Sure, Burt. Then

Sometimes I wonder how I ever wound up married to you.

"By saying two little words."

She stared at him for a moment, white-faced and then picked up the road atlas. She turned the pages savagely.

It had been a mistake leaving the turnpike, Burt thought morosely. It was a shame, too, because up until then they had been doing pretty well, treating each other almost like human beings. It had sometimes seemed that this trip to the coast, ostensibly to see Vicky's brother and his wife but actually a last-ditch attempt to patch up their own marriage, was going to work.

But since they left the pike, it had been bad again. How bad? Well, terrible actually.

"We left the turnpike at Hamburg, right?"

"Right."

"There's nothing more until Gathen," she said. Twenty miles. "We'd place in the road. Do you suppose we could stop there and get something to eat?" Or does your almighty schedule say we have to go until two o'clock like we did yesterday?"

He took his eyes off the road to look at her. I've about had it, Vicky. As far as I'm concerned, we can turn right here and go home and see that lawyer you wanted to talk to. Because this isn't working at

She had faced forward again, her expression stony set. It suddenly turned to surprise and fear. *Burt took out you're going to -*

He turned his attention back to the road just in time to see something vanish under the T-Bird's bumper. A mo-

ment later when he was only beginning to switch from gas to brake he felt something thump sickeningly under the front and then the back wheels they were thrown forward as the car braked along the centre line decelerating from fifty to zero along black skid marks

A dog he said told me it was a dog Nicky

Her face was a pale old cottage cheese colour A boy A Little boy He just ran out of the corn and congratulations tiger

She fumbled the car door open leaned out threw up

Burt sat straight behind the F Bird's wheel hands still gripping it loosely He was aware of nothing for a long time but the rich dark smell of fertilizer

Then he saw that Nicky was gone and when he looked in the outside mirror he saw her stumbling clumsily back towards a heaped bundle that looked like a pile of rags She was ordinarily a graceful woman but now her grace was gone, robbed

*It's manslaughter That's what they call it Fuck my eyes off the road*

He turned the ignition off and got out The wind rustled softly through the growing man high corn making a weird sound like respiration Nicky was standing over the bundle of rags now and he could hear her sobbing

He was halfway between the car and where she stood and somehow caught his eye on the left a gaudy splash of red amid all the green as bright as barn paint

He stopped looking directly at the corn He found himself thinking anything to distract from those rags that were not rags that I must have been a fantastically good growing season for corn It grew close together almost ready to bear You could plunge into those neat shaded rows and spend a day trying to find your way out again But the neatness was broken here Several tall cornstalks had been broken and leaned askew And what was that further back in the shadows?

Burt Nicky screamed at him Don't you want to come

see? So you can tell all your poker buddies what you bagged in Nebraska? Don't you? But the rest was lost in fresh sobs. Her shadow was puddled starkly around her feet. It was almost noon.

Shade closed over him as he entered the corn. The red barn paint was blood. There was a low, somnolent buzz as flies it tasted and buzzed off again — maybe to tell others. There was more blood on the leaves further in. Surely it couldn't have spattered this far? And then he was standing over the object he had seen from the road. He picked it up.

The neatness of the rows was disturbed here. Several stalks were canted drunkenly, two of them had been broken clean off. The earth had been gouged. There was blood. The corn rustled. With a little shiver he walked back to the road.

Vicky was having hysterics, screaming unintelligible words at him, crying, laughing. Who would have thought it could end in such a melodramatic way? He looked at her and saw he wasn't having an identity crisis or a difficult life transition or any of those trendy things. He hated her. He gave her a hard slap across the face.

She stopped short and put a hand against the reddening impression of his fingers. 'You'll go to jail, Burt,' she said solemnly.

'I don't think so,' he said, and put the suitcase he had found in the corn at her feet.

'What?'

'I don't know. I guess it belonged to him.' He pointed to the sprawled, face-down body that lay on the road. No more than thirteen, from the look of him.

The suitcase was old. The brown leather was battered and scuffed. Two hanks of clothes, one had been wrapped around it and tied in large clownish grannies. Vicky bent to undo one of them, saw the blood greased in on the knot and withdrew.

Burt knelt and turned the body over gently.

I don't want to look," Vicky said, staring down her glossed-away anyway. And when the staring sightless face flopped up to regard them, she screamed again. The boy's face was dirty, his expression a grimace of terror. His throat had been cut.

Burt got up and put his arms around Vicky as she began to sway. "Don't faint," he said very quietly. "Do you hear me, Vicky? Don't faint."

He repeated it over and over and at last she began to recover and held him tight. They might have been dancing here on the moon-struck road with the boy's corpse at their feet.

"Vicky?"

"What?" Muffled against his shirt.

"Go back to the car and put the keys in your pocket. Get the blanket out of the back seat and my rifle. Bring them here."

"The rifle?"

"Someone cut his throat. Maybe whoever is watching us."

Her head jerked up and her wide eyes considered the corn. It marched away as far as the eye could see, undulating up and down, steep dips and rises of land.

"I imagine he's gone. But why take chances? Go on. Do it."

She walked stiffly back to the car, her shadow following, a dark mascot who stuck close at this hour of the day. When she leaned into the back seat, Burt squatted beside the boy. White male, no distinguishing marks. Run over yes, but the T-Bird hadn't cut the guy's throat. It had been cut raggedly and messily, not an army sergeant had shown the killer the finer points of hand-to-hand assassination but the final effect had been deadly. He had either run or been pushed through the last thirty feet of corn, dead or mortally wounded. And Burt Robeson had run him down. If the boy had still been alive when the car hit him, his life had been cut short by thirty seconds at most.

Vicky tapped him on the shoulder and he jumped.

She was standing with the brown army blanket over her

left arm, the cased pump shotgun in her right hand, her face averted. He took the blanket and spread it on the road. He rolled the body out on it. Nicky averted a desperate gaze from

You okay? He looked up at her. Nicky?

Okay, she said in a strangled voice.

He slipped the sides of the blanket over the body and scooped it up, hating the thick, dead weight of it. It tried to make a U in his arms and sather through his grasp. He clutched it tighter and they walked back to the T-Bird.

Open the trunk, he grunted.

The trunk was full of travel stuff, suitcases and souvenirs. Nicky shifted most of it into the back seat and Burt slipped the body into the made space and slammed the trunk lid down. A sigh of relief escaped him.

Nicky was standing by the driver's side door, still holding the cased rifle.

Just put it in the back and get in.

He looked at his watch and saw only fifteen minutes had passed. It seemed like hours.

What about the suitcase? she asked.

He trotted back down the road to where it stood on the white line like the focal point in an Impressionist painting. He picked it up by its tattered handle and paused for a moment. He had a strong sensation of being watched. It was a feeling he had read about in books, mostly cheap fiction, and he had always doubted its reality. Now he didn't. It was as if there were people in the corn, maybe a lot of them, cooly estimating whether the woman could get the gun out of the case and use it before they could grab him, drag him into the shady rows, cut his throat.

Heart beating thickly, he ran back to the car, pulled the keys out of the trunk lock, and got in.

Nicky was crying again. Burt got them moving, and before a minute had passed, he could no longer pick out the spot where it had happened in the rear view mirror.

What did you say the next town was? he asked.

'Oh. She bent over the road atlas again. Gathin. We should be there in ten minutes.'

'Does it look big enough to have a police station?'

'No. It's just a dot.'

'Maybe there is a constable.'

They drove in silence for a while. They passed a silo on the left. Nothing else but corn. Nothing passed them going the other way, not even a farm truck.

'Have we passed anything since we got off the turnpike, Vicky?'

She thought about it. A car and a tractor. At that intersection.'

No, since we got on this road, Route 17.'

'No. I don't think we have. Earlier this might have been the preface to some cutting remark. Now she only stared out of her half of the windshield at the unrolling road and the endless dotted line.'

'Vicky? Could you open the suitcase?'

'Do you think it might matter?'

'Don't know. It might.'

While she picked at the knots (her face was set in a peculiar way, expressionless but tight-mouthed), that Burt remembered his mother wearing when she pulled the innards out of the Sunday chicken, Burt turned on the radio again.

The pop station they had been listening to was almost obliterated in static and Burt switched, running the red marker slowly down the dial. Farm reports. Buck Owens. Tammy Wynette. All distant, nearly distorted into babble. Then, near the end of the dial, one single word blared out of the speaker, so loud and clear that the lips which uttered it might have been directly beneath the grill of the dashboard speaker.

'ATONEMENT' this voice bellowed.

Burt made a surprised grunting sound. Vicky jumped.

'ONLY BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB ARE WE SAVED' the voice roared, and Burt hurriedly turned the

sound down. This station was close all right. So close that yes, there it was. Poking out of the corn at the horizon, a spidery red tripod against the blue. The radio tower.

Atonement is the word brothers n sisters the voice to d them, dropping to a more conversational pitch. In the background off mike voices murmured amen. 'There's some that thinks it's okay to get out in the world as if you could work and walk in the world without being smirched by the world. Now is that what the word of God teaches us?'

Off-mike but st l loud. 'No!'

*HOLY JESUS*" the evangelist shouted and now the words came in a powerful pumping cadence almost as compelling as a driving rock and roll beat. When they gonna know that way is death? When they gonna know that the wages of the world are paid on the other side? Huh? Huh? The Lord has said there's many mansions in His house. But there's no room for the fornicator. No room for the coveter. No room for the defiler of the corn. No room for the hommasexshui. No room.'

Vicky snapped it off. 'That drivel makes me sick.'

'What did he say?' Burt asked her. 'What did he say about corn?'

I didn't hear it. She was picking at the second clothes-line knot.

'He said something about corn. I know he did.'

'I got it.' Vicky said and the suitcase fell open in her lap. They were passing a sign that said GATLIN 5 MI. DRIVE CAREFULLY PROTECT OUR CHILDREN. The sign had been put up by the Elks. There were 22 bullet holes in it.

Socks. Vicky said. Two pairs of pants a shirt a belt a string tie with a - She held it up showing him the peeling gilt neck clasp. Who's that?

Burt glanced at it. Hopalong Cassidy I think.'

Oh. She put it back. She was crying again.

After a moment Burt said. Did anything strike you funny about that radio sermon?'

—No, I heard enough of that stuff as a kid to last me for ever. I told you about it.

“ Didn’t you think he sounded kind of young? That preacher?”

She uttered a mirthless laugh. A teenager, maybe so what? That’s what you menaceas about that whole trip. They like to get hold of them when their minds are still rubber. They know how to put at the emotional hooks and balances in. You should have been at some of the tent meetings my mother and father dragged me to — some of the ones I was ~~sick~~ at.

Let’s see. There was Baby Hollenbeck, the Singing Mayo. She was eight. She got me on an “I sing, I bearing in the Ever-lasting Arms” while her daddy passed her plate telling everybody to sing keep now, let’s not let this child of God down. Then there was Norman Staunton. He used to preach before any baptism in these. The Lord Fauntleroy suit with short pants. He was only seven.

She nodded at his stock of unbelief.

They weren’t the only two either. There were plenty of them on the circuit. They were good drawrs. She spat the word. Ruby Stampner. She was a ten-year-old faulter. The Grace Sisters. They used to come out with their hands over their heads and “oh.”

“ What is it? ” He asked again. He looked at her, and what she was holding in her hands. Vicky was staring at it raptly. Her slowly moving hands had unzipped it on the bottom of the suitcase and had brought it up as she talked. Huff poised over to take a better look. She gave it to him without a word.

It was a canteen that had been made from twists of corn husk, once green, now dry. Attached to this by woven cords was a dwarf corn cob. Most of the kernels had been carefully removed, probably dug out one at a time with a pocket knife. Those kernels remaining formed a crude eye-shaped figure in yellowish brown red. Corn kernel eyes, each slightly sideways, suggesting pupils. Outstretched kernel arms, the legs together, forming a rough education of

bare feet. Above, four letters also raised from the bone  
white body: I N R I

'That's a fantastic piece of workmanship,' he said.

'It's hideous,' she said in a flat, strained voice. 'Throw it out.'

'Vicky, the police might want to see it.'

'Why?'

'Well, I don't know why. Maybe—'

'Throw it out. Will you please do that for me? I don't want it in the car.'

'I'll put it in back. And as soon as we see the cops, we'll get rid of it one way or the other. I promise. Okay?'

'Oh, do whatever you want with it,' she shouted at him.  
'You will anyway!'

Trashed he drew the thing in back, where it landed on a pile of clothes. Its corn-kerne eyes stared raptly at the T-Bird's dome light. He pulled out again, gravel spouting from beneath the tyres.

'We'll give the body and everything that was in the suitcase to the cops,' he promised. 'Then we'll be rid of it.'

Vicky didn't answer. She was looking at her hands.

A mile further on, the endless cornfields drew away from the road, showing farmhouses and outbuildings. In one yard they saw dirty chickens pecking idly at the soil. There were faded cows and chewing gum ads on the roofs of barns. They passed a tall billboard that said: ONLY JESUS SAVES. They passed a cafe with a Conoco gas island, but Burt decided to go on into the centre of town, if there was one. It met, they could come back to the cafe. It only occurred to him after they had passed it that the parking lot had been empty except for a dirty old pickup that had looked like it was sitting on two flat tyres.

Vicky suddenly began to laugh, a high, giggling sound that struck Burt as being dangerously close to hysteria.

'What's so funny?'

'The signs,' she said, gasping and hiccupping. 'Haven't

you been reading them? When they called this the Bible Belt they sure weren't kidding. Oh Lordy there's another bunch.' Another burst of hysterical laughter escaped her and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

Each sign had only one word. They were leaning on whitewashed stumps that had been implanted in the sandy shoulder long ago by the looks the whitewash was flaked and faded. They were coming up at eighty-foot intervals and Burt read:

A . . CLOUD . . BY DAY . . A . . PILLAR . . OF FIRE BY NIGHT

'They only forgot one thing,' Vicky said still giggling helplessly.

'What?' Burt asked, frowning.

'Burma Shave.' She held a knuckled fist against her open mouth to keep in the laughter but her semi-hysterical giggles flowed around it like effervescent ginger ale bubbles.

'Vicky are you all right?'

'I will be. Just as soon as we're a thousand miles away from here in sunny sunful California with the Rockies between us and Nebraska.'

Another group of signs came up and they read them silently:

TAKE THIS AND EAT SAITH THE LORD . . GOD

Now why Burt thought, should I immediately associate that indefinite pronoun with corn? Isn't that what they say when they give you communion? It had been so long since he had been to church that he really couldn't remember. He wouldn't be surprised if they used cornbread for holy wafer around these parts. He opened his mouth to tell Vicky that and then thought better of it.

They breasted a gentle rise and there was Gathen below them, all three blocks of it, looking like a set from a movie about the Depression.

'There'll be a constable,' Burt said, and wondered why

the sight of that block one-timetable town dozing in the sun should have brought a lump of dread into his throat.

They passed a speed sign proclaiming that no more than thirty was now in order and another sign just erected which said YOU ARE NOW ENTERING GATLIN 'NILEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA OR ANYWHERE ELSE' POP. 453.

Dusty elms stood on both sides of the road, most of them dead. They passed the Gatlin Lumberyard and a 76 gas station where the price signs swung slowly in a hot noon breeze REG 75¢ 9¢ REST 38¢ and another which said HI TRUCKERS DIESEL FUEL AROUND BACK.

They crossed Elm Street, then Birch Street, and came up on the town square. The houses among the streets were plain wood with screened porches. Angular and functional. The lawns were yellow and dispirited. Up ahead a mongrel dog walked slowly out into the middle of Maple Street, stood looking at them for a moment, then lay down in the road with its nose on its paws.

Stop, Nicky said. Stop right here.

Burt pulled obediently to the curb.

Turn around. Let's take the body to Grand Island. That's not too far, is it? Let's do that.

Nicky, what's wrong?

What do you mean, what's wrong? she asked, her voice rising thinly. This town is empty, Burt. There's nobody here but us. Can't you feel that?

He had felt something, and still felt it. But

It just seems that way, he said. But it sure is a one-hydrant town. Probably all up in the square, having a bake sale or a bingo game.

There's no one here. She said the words with a queer strained emphasis. Didn't you see that 76 station back there?

Sure, by the lumberyard, so what? His mind was elsewhere, listening to the dull buzz of a cicada burrowing into one of the nearby elms. He could smell corn, dusty roses and fertilizer, of course. For the first time they were off the

turnpike and in a town. A town in a state he had never been in before (although he had flown over it from time to time in United Airlines 747s) and somehow I felt all wrong but all right. Somewhere up ahead there would be a drugstore with a soda fountain, a movie house named the Bijou, a school named after JFK.

Burt the prices said thirty-five-nine for regular and thirty-eight-nine for high octane. Now how long has it been since anyone in this country paid those prices?

At least four years, he admitted. But, Vicky

We're right in town, Burt, and there's not a car. *Not one car!*

\*Grand Island is seventy miles away. It would look funny if we took him there.\*

\*I don't care.

\*Look, let's just drive up to the courthouse and—

\*No!\*

There, damn it, there. Why our marriage is falling apart, in a nutshell. No I won't. No sir. And furthermore I'll hold my breath until I turn blue if you don't let me have my way.

'Vicky,' he said.

I want to get out of here. Burt.'

Vicky, listen to me.'

Turn around. Let's go.

Vicky will you stop a minute?'

I'll stop when we're driving the other way. Now let's go.'

*We have a dead chud in the trunk of our car!* he roared at her and took a distinct pleasure at the way she flinched, the way her face crumpled. In a slightly lower voice he went on. 'His throat was cut and he was shoved out into the road and I ran him over. Now I'm going to drive up to the courthouse or whatever they have here and I'm going to report it. If you want to start walking towards the pike go to it. I'll pick you up. But don't you tell me to turn around and drive seventy miles to Grand Island like we had nothing in the trunk but a bag of garbage. He happens to be some

mother's son, and I'm going to report it before whoever killed him gets over the hills and far away

'You bastard,' she said, crying. 'What am I doing with you?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't know any more. But the situation can be remedied, Vicky.'

He pulled away from the curb. The dog lifted its head at the brief squeal of the tyres and then lowered it to its paws again.

They drove the remaining block to the square. At the corner of Main and Pleasant, Main Street split in two. There actually was a town square, a grassy park with a bandstand in the middle. On the other end, where Main Street became one again, there were two official-looking buildings. Burt could make out the lettering on one: GATLIN MUNICIPAL CENTER.

'That's it,' he said. Vicky said nothing.

Halfway up the square, Burt pulled over again. They were beside a lunch room, the Gatlin Bar and Grill.

'Where are you going?' Vicky asked with alarm as he opened his door.

To find out where everyone is. Sign in the window there says 'open'.'

You're not going to leave me here alone.

'So come. Who's stopping you?'

She unlocked her door and stepped out as he crossed in front of the car. He saw how pale her face was and felt an instant of pity. Hopeless pity.

'Do you hear it?' she asked as he joined her.

'Hear what?'

'The nothing. No cars. No people. No tractors. Nothing.'

And then, from a block over, they heard the high and joyous laughter of children.

'I hear kids,' he said. 'Don't you?'

She looked at him, troubled.

He opened the lunchroom door and stepped into dry, antiseptic heat. The floor was dusty. The sheen on the

the crime was done. The wooden blades of the scything fans stood still. Empty tables. Empty counter stools. But the motor behind the counter had been shattered and there was some broken glass. In a moment he had it. All the best taps had been broken off. They lay along the counter like bizarre party favours.

Nicky's voice was raw and near to breaking. Sure. Ask anybody. Pardon me sir, but could you tell me

"Oh shut up." But his voice was flat and without force. They were standing in a bar at dusty sunlight that fell through the lunchroom's big plate-glass window and again he had that feeling of being watched and he thought of the boy they had in their trunk and of the high laughter of children. A phrase came to him for no reason, a legal sounding phrase, and it began to repeat mysteriously in his mind. *Nightmaren. Nekromaren. Nekromaren.*

His eyes traversed over the age ve lewd cat a thumb  
tucked up behind the counter, a scorpion on the wall -  
KETCHUP & LEMON STRAWBERRY PIE BAKED TOMATOES  
HAMBURGERS & BROWN BAG BURGERS

How long since he had seen such sum prices like that? Nicky had the answer. Look at this, she said shortly. She was pointing at the calendar on the wall. They've been at that beast supper for twelve years, I guess. She uttered a grinding laugh.

He walked over. The picture showed me boys swimming in a pond while a cow & a dog carried off their clothes. Below the picture was the legend: **COMPRESSED** **PRINTS** **10¢** **SCARF & STICKWARE** **Tom Breakum** **We Farm** The month my son was A just 14th

I don't understand," he faltered, "but I'm sure  
You're sure," she cried hysterically. "Sure, You're sure  
That's partly your trouble. Start you've spent your whole  
life being *sure!*"

He turned back to the door and she came after him.

Where are you going?

### In the Music part center

Burt, why do you have to be so stubborn? You know something's wrong here. Can't you just admit it?

I'm not being stubborn. I just want to get rid of what's in that trunk.

They stepped out onto the sidewalk, and Burt was struck afresh with the town's silence, and with the smell of fertilizer. Somehow you never thought of that smell when you buttered an ear and sauted it and bit in. Complements of sun, rain, all sorts of man-made phosphates, and a good healthy dose of cow shit. But somehow this smell was different from the one he had grown up with in rural upstate New York. You could say whatever you wanted to about organic fertilizer, but there was something almost fragrant about it when the spreader was laying it down in the fields. Not one of your great perfumes. God no, but when the late-afternoon spring breeze would pick up and wash it over the freshly turned fields, it was a smell with good associations. It meant winter was over for good. It meant that school doors were going to hang closed in six weeks or so and stay, everyone out in the summer. It was a smell tied irrevocably in his mind with other aromas that were perfume: timothy grass, clover, fresh earth, hollyhocks, dogwood.

But they must do something different out here, he thought. The smell I was used to, he said. There was a kind of kish sweet undertone. Almost a death smell. As a medical orderly in Vietnam, he had become well versed in that smell.

Nicky was sitting quietly in the car, holding the corn cob high up and staring at it in a rapt way Burt didn't like.

Put that thing down, he said.

No, she said without looking up. You play your games and I'll play mine.

He put the car in gear and drove up to the corner. A dead stoplight hung overhead, swinging in a faint breeze. To the left was a neat white church. The grass was cut. Neatly kept.

flowers grew beside the flagged path up to the door. Burt pulled over.

What are you doing?"

"I'm going to go in and take a look." Burt said. "It's the only place in town that looks as if there isn't ten years dust on it. And look at the sermon board."

She looked. Neatly pegged white letters under glass read THE POWER AND GRACE OF HE WHO WALKS BEHIND THE ROWS. The date was 27 July 1976—the Sunday before

He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Burt said, turning off the ignition. "One of the nine thousand names of God only used in Nebraska, I guess. Coming?"

She didn't smile. "I'm not going in with you."

"Fine. Whatever you want."

"I haven't been in a church since I left home and I don't want to be in *this* church and I don't want to be in *this* town," Burt. "I'm scared out of my mind—can't we just go?"

"I'll only be a minute."

"I've got my keys, Burt. If you're not back in five minutes, I'll just drive away and leave you here."

"Now just wait a minute, lady."

"That's what I'm going to do. Unless you want to assault me like a common mugger and take my keys. I suppose you could do that."

"But you don't think I will."

"No."

Her purse was on the seat between them. He snatched it up. She screamed and grabbed for the shoulder strap. He pulled it out of her reach. Not by the time to dig—he simply turned the bag upside down and let everything fall out. Her key-ring glittered amid tissues, cosmetics, change, shopping lists. She lunged for it but he beat her again and put the keys in his own pocket.

"You don't have to do that," she said, crying. "Give them to me."

"No," he said, and gave her a hard, meaningless grin. "No way."

*Please Burt I'm scared!*" She held her hand out, pleading now.

You'd wait two minutes and decide that was long enough.

I wouldn't.

"And then you'd drive off laughing and saying to yourself, 'That's teach Burt to cross me when I want something.' Hasn't that pretty much been your motto during our married life? That's teach Burt to cross me!"

He got out of the car.

Please Burt," she screamed, sliding across the seat. Listen. I know we'll drive out of town and call from a phone booth, okay? I've got all kinds of change. I just we can *don't leave me alone. Burt, don't leave me out here alone!*"

He slammed the door on her cry and then leaned against the side of the T-Bird for a moment, thumbs against his closed eyes. She was pounding on the driver's side window and calling his name. She was going to make a wonderful impression when he finally found someone in authority to take charge of the kid's body. Oh yes.

He turned and walked up the flagstone path to the church doors. Two or three minutes, just a look around, and he would be back out. Probably the door wasn't even unlocked.

But it pushed in easily on silent, well-oiled hinges (reverently oiled, he thought, and that seemed funny for no really good reason) and he stepped into a vestibule so cool it was almost chilly. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness.

The first thing he noticed was a pile of wooden letters in the far corner, dusty and jumbled and differently together. He went to them, curious. They looked as old and forgotten as the calendar in the bar and grill, unlike the rest of the vestibule, which was dust-free and tidy. The letters were about two feet high, obviously part of a set. He spread them out on the carpet. There were eighteen of them, and

shifted them around like anagrams. RHE BITE CRAC CHAP TS. Nope. CRAP TAC ET can't be it. That wasn't much good either. Except for the CH in CHAS. He quickly assembled the word CH RHE and was left looking at RAP TAC ET CHS. Foolish. He was squatting here playing idiot games with a bunch of letters while Vicky was going nuts out in the car. He started to get up and then saw it. He formed BAPTIST leaving RAG EC and by changing two letters he had GRACE GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH. The letters must have been out front. They had taken them down and had thrown them indifferently in the corner and the church had been painted since then so that you couldn't even see where the letters had been.

Why?

It wasn't the Grace Baptist Church any more, that was why. So what kind of church was it? For some reason that question caused a truck load of fear and he stood up quickly dusting his fingers. So they had taken down a bunch of letters, so what. Maybe they had changed the place into Flip Wilson's Church of What's Happening Now.

But what had happened then?

He shook it off impatiently and went through the inner doors. Now he was standing at the back of the church itself and as he looked towards the nave he felt fear course and his heart and squeeze tightly. His breath drew in loud in the pregnant silence of this place.

The space before the pulpit was dominated by a gigantic portrait of Christ and Bart thought it nothing else in this town gave Vicky the screaming memories this world.

The Christ was grinning sullenly. His eyes were white and staring, reminding Bart immediately of Lon Charey in *The Phantom of the Opera*. In each of the wide black pupils someone a sinner, presumably, was drowning in a sea of fire. But the oddest thing was that his Christ had a bunch of hair which on closer examination revealed the fact he'd a twining mass of early summer corn. The picture was crudely done but effective. It looked like a comic strip.

moral done by a gifted child—an Old Testament Christ or a pagan Christ that might sacrifice his sheep for sacrifice instead of leading them.

At the foot of the left-hand ranks of pews was a pipe organ, and Bart could not at first tell what was wrong with it. He walked down the left-hand aisle and saw with slow, dawning horror that the keys had been ripped up, the stops had been pulled out, and the pipes themselves fired with dry cornhusks. Over the organ was a carefully lettered plaque which read: **MAKE NO MUSIC EXCEPT WITH HUMAN TONE, & SATIN THE LORD GOD.**

Vicky was right. Something was terribly wrong here. He debated going back to Vicky without exploring any further just getting into the car and leaving town as quickly as possible, never mind the Municipal Building. But it grated on him. Tell the truth, he thought. You want to give her *Ban Solid* a workout before going back and admitting she was right to start with.

He would go back in a minute or so.

He walked towards the pulpit, thinking. People must go through Gathen all the time. There must be people in the neighbouring towns who have friends and relatives here. The Nebraska SP must cruise through from time to time. And what about the power company? The stoplight had been dead. Surely they'd know if the power had been off for twelve long years. Conclusion: What seemed to have happened in Gathen was impossible.

And he had the creeps.

He climbed the four carpeted steps to the pulpit and looked out over the deserted pews, glimmering in the half-shadows. He seemed to feel the weight of those eldritch and decidedly unchristian eyes boring into his back.

There was a large Bible on the lectern, opened to the thirty-eighth chapter of Job. Bart glanced down at it and read. Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words

without knowledge? Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Before I though hast understanding? The Lord, He Who Walks Behind the Rows, Do you tell thou hast understanding? And please pass the corn?

He瀏覽ed the pages of the Bible and they made a dry whistling sound in his net, the sound that ghosts might make if there really were such things. And now a piece like this you could almost believe. Sections of the Bible had been chopped out. Mostly from the New Testament, he saw. Some he had decided to take on the job of amending Good King James with a pair of scissors.

But the Old Testament was intact.

He was about to leave the pulpit when he saw another book on a lower shelf and took it out, thinking it might be a church record of weddings and confirmations and burials.

He grimaced at the words stamped in the cover, done inexpertly in gold leaf. THIS IS FOR THE INQUIRIES BE CUT DOWN SO THAT THE CHILDREN MAY BE FERTILE AGAIN SAITH THE BOLD GOD OF HOSTS.

There seemed to be the train of thought around here and Bartholomew much on the track I seemed to ride on.

He opened the book to the first wide knew sheet. A child had done the lettering, he saw immediately. In places an ink eraser had been carelessly used and while there were no misspellings, the letters were large and chunky made drawn rather than written. The first column read:

Amen De gan Richard	b Sept 4 1945	Sept 4 1964
Isaac Renthrew (William)	b Sept 9 1945	Sept 9 1964
Zepenah Kirk (George)	b Oct 4 1945	Oct 13 1964
Mary Wren (Ruth)	b Nov 12 1945	Nov 12 1964
Yemen Morris Edward	b Jan 5 1946	Jan 5 1965

Browning Hurt continued to turn through the pages. Three quarters of the way through the double columns ended abruptly.

Rachel Stephan (Dorothy)	b June 2 1957	June 21 1976
Moses Richardson (Henry)	b July 29 1957	

Malachy Roardman (Craig) b August 15 1957

The last entry in the book was for Ruth Clawson (Sandra) b April 30 1961. Burt looked at the shelf where he had found this book and came up with two more. The first had the same INQUIRIES BE CUT DOWN logo and it contained the same record, the single column tracing birth dates and names. In early September of 1964 he found Job Guinan (Clayton) b September 6 and the next entry was Eve Lubin b June 16 1965. No second name in parentheses.

The third book was blank.

Standing behind the pulpit Burt thought about it. Something had happened in 1964. Something to do with religion and corn and children.

*Dear God we beg thy blessing on the crop For Jesus sake, amen.*

And the knife raised high to sacrifice the lamb but had it been a lamb? Perhaps a religious mania had swept them. Alone, all alone cut off from the outside world by hundreds of square miles of the rusting secret corn. Alone under seventy million acres of blue sky. Alone under the watchful eye of God now a strange green God a God of corn grown old and strange and hungry. He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Burt felt a chill creep into his flesh.

Vicky let me tell you a story. It's about Amos Deigan who was born Richard Deigan on 4 September 1946. He took the name Amos in 1964. The Old Testament name Amos one of the minor prophets. Well Vicky what happened don't laugh is that Dick Deigan and his friends - Bily Renfrew George Kirk Roberta Wells and Eddie Holis among others - they got religion and they killed off their parents. All of them. Isn't that a scream? Shot them in their beds knifed them in their bathtubs poisoned their suppers hung them or disembowelled them, for all I know.

Why? The corn. Maybe it was dying. Maybe they got the

idea somehow that it was dying because there was so much sunning. Not enough sacrifice. They would have done it in the corn, in the rows.

And somehow Vicky I'm quite sure of this somehow they decided that nineteen was as old as any of them could live. Richard Arnes Deigan the hero of our little story had his nineteenth birthday on 4 September 1964 the date in the book. I think maybe they killed him. Sacrificed him in the corn. Isn't that a silly story?

But let's look at Rachel Stigman who was Donna Stigman until 1964. She turned nineteen on 21 June just about a month ago. Moses Richardson was born on 24 July just three days from today he'll be nineteen. Any idea what's going to happen to our Moses on his twenty ninth?

I can guess.

Burt fucked his lips which felt dry

One other thing Vicky. Look at this. We have Job German Clayton born on 6 September 1964. No other birthmarks, but the 1965. A gap of ten months. Know what I think? They killed all the parents even the pregnant ones that's what I think. And one of them got pregnant in October of 1964 and gave birth to Eve. Some sixteen- or seventeen year old girl. Eve. *The first woman*

He thrashed back through the book feverishly and found the Eve. John entry. Beauvoir. Adam Greenlaw b. July 11, 1965

They'd be lost now he thought and his flesh began to crawl. And maybe they're out here. Someplace

But how could such a thing be kept secret? How could it go on?

How unless the God in question approved?

Oh Jesus. Burt said into the silence and that was when the T Bird's horn began to blare into the afternoon, one long continuous blast.

Burt jumped from the pupit and ran down the centre aisle. He threw open the outer vestibule door, letting in hot sunshine dazzling. Vicky was bold upright behind the

steering wheel, both hands clasped on the horn ring, her head swiveling wildly. From all directions the children were coming. Some of them were laughing gaily. They had knives, hatchets, pipes, rocks, hammers. One girl, maybe eight, with beauti- a long blonde hair, held a jackknife. Run away! Not a gun among them. Burt felt a wild urge to scream out. *Where is your Adam and Eve? Who are the mothers? Who are the daughters? Fathers? Sons?*

Declare it thou hast understanding.

They came from the side streets. It is on the town green through the gate in the chain-link fence around the school playground a block further east. Some of them glanced indifferently at Burt, standing frozen on the church steps and some nudged each other and pointed and sniped the sweet smiles of children.

The girls were dressed in long brown wool and faded sun bonnets. The boys, like Quaker parsons, were all in black and wore rounder, rounder flat brimmed hats. They streamed across the town square towards the wet, across lawns, a few came across the front yard of what had been the Grace Baptist Church in 1964. One or two of them almost close enough to touch.

The shotgun. Burt yelled. Nicky, get the shotgun.

But she was frozen in her panic, he could see that, from the steps. He doubted if she could even hear him through the closed windows.

They converged on the Thunderbird. The axes and hatchets and chunks of pipe began to rise and fall. My God am I seeing this? he thought frozenly. An arrow of chrome clattered off the side of the car. The hood ornament, wearing knives, crawled sprawled through the sidewalk, of the sides and the car settled. The horn blared on and on. The windshield and side windows went opaque and cracked under the onslaught. and then the safety glass sprayed inwards and he could see again. Nicky was crouched back, only one hand on the horn ring now, the other thrown up to protect her face. Eager young hands reached in, fumbling

for the lock unlock button. She beat them away wildly. The horn became intermittent and then stopped altogether.

The beaten and dented driver's side door was hauled open. They were trying to drag her out but her hands were wrapped around the steering wheel. Then one of them leaned in, knife in hand.

His paralysis broke and he plunged down the steps almost fainting and ran down the flagstone walk towards them. One of them, a boy about sixteen with long long red hair spilling out from beneath his hat, turned towards him almost casually and something flicked through the air. Burt's left arm jerked backwards and for a moment he had the absurd thought that he had been punched at long distance. Then the pain came so sharp and sudden that the world went grey.

He examined his arm with a stupid sort of wonder. A buck and half Pensy jack knife was growing out of it like a strange tumour. The sleeve of his J. C. Penney sports shirt was turning red. He looked at it for what seemed like forever, trying to understand how he could have grown a jack knife. Was it possible?

When he looked up, the boy with red hair was a most on top of him. He was grinning, confident.

Hey you bastard, Burt said. His voice was breaking, shocked.

Remand your soul to God, for you will stand before His throne momentarily, the boy with the red hair said and clawed for Burt's eyes.

Burt stepped back, pulled the Pensy out of his arm and stuck it into the red haired boy's throat. The gush of blood was immediate, gigantic. Burt was splashed with it. The red haired boy began to gobble and walk in a large circle. He clawed at the knife, trying to pull it free and was unable. Burt watched him, jaw hanging agape. None of this was happening. It was a dream. The red haired boy gobbled and walked. Now his wound was the only one in the hot early afternoon. The others watched, stunned.

This part of it wasn't in the script. Burt thought numbly. Vicky and I were in the script. And the boy in the corn who was trying to run away. But not one of their own. He stared at them savage & wanting to scream. *How do you like it?*

The red haired boy gave one last weak gurgle and sank to his knees. He stared up at Burt for a moment and then his hands dropped away from the shaft of the knife and he fell forward.

A soft sighing sound from the children gathered around the Thunderbird. They stared at Burt. Burt stared back at them, fascinated — and that was when he noticed that Vicky was gone.

Where is she? he asked. Where did you take her?

One of the boys raised a blood-streaked hunting knife towards his throat and made a sawing motion there. He grinned. That was the only answer.

From somewhere in back, an older boy's voice soft. Get him.

The boys began to walk towards him. Burt backed up. They began to walk faster. Burt backed up faster. The shotgun, the god-damned shotgun. Out of reach. The sun cast their shadows darkly on the green church lawn — and then he was on the sidewalk. He turned and ran.

*Aut him!* someone roared, and they came after him.

He ran, but not quite hard & He skirted the Municipal Building, no help there, they would corner him like a rat and ran on up Main Street, which opened out and became the highway again two blocks farther up. He and Vicky would have been on that road now and away, if he had only listened.

His leathers slapped against the sidewalk. Ahead of him he could see a few more business buildings, including the Carlton Ice Cream Shoppe and — sure enough — the Bowery Theatre. The dust-encrusted marquee letters read NOW SHOW THE LITTLE INNACEMEN ELIA IR TATE DICKIE PARKA. Beyond the next cross street was a gas station that marked the edge

of town. And beyond that the corn closing back in to the sides of the road. A green wall of corn.

Burt ran. He was already out of breath and the knfe wound in his upper arm was beginning to hurt. And he was leaving a trail of blood. As he ran he yanked his bandkerchief from his back pocket and stuck it inside his shirt.

He ran. His oafers pounded the cracked cement of the sidewalk, his breath rasped in his throat with more and more heat. His arm began to throb in earnest. Some mordant part of his brain tried to ask if he thought he could run all the way to the next town. If he could run twenty miles of two lane highway.

He ran. Behind him he could hear them fifteen years younger and faster than he was gaining. Their feet slapped on the pavement. They whooped and shouted back and forth to each other. They're having more fun than a five alarm fire. Burt thought drowsily. They talk about it for years.

Burt ran.

He ran past the gas stat, marking the edge of town. His breath gasped and roured in his chest. The sidewalk ran out under his feet. And now there was only one thing to do, only one chance to beat them and escape with his life. The houses were gone, the town was gone. The corn had surged in a soft green wave back to the edges of the road. The green swordlike leaves rustled softly. It would be deep in there, deep and cool, shady in the rows of man high corn.

He ran past a sign that said YOU ARE NOW LEAVING GATES IN WEST, THE TOWN IN NEBRASKA. OR ANYWHERE ELSE! DROP IN ANYTIME!

It be sure to do that, Burt thought dimly.

He ran past the sign like a sprinter closing on the tape and then swerved left, crossing the road, and kicked his oafers away. Then he was in the corn and it closed behind him and over him like the waves of a green sea taking him in. Hug him. He felt a sudden and wholly unexpected relief sweep him and at the same moment he got his second

wind. His lungs, which had been shallowing up, seemed to unlock and give him more breath.

He ran straight down the first row he had entered, head ducked, his broad shoulders swaying the leaves and making them tremble. Twenty yards in he turned right, parallel to the road again, and ran on, keeping low so they wouldn't see his dark head of hair bobbing amid the yellow corn tassels. He dashed back towards the road for a few moments, crossed more rows, and then put his back to the road and hopped randomly from row to row, always diving deeper and deeper into the corn.

At last he collapsed on to his knees and put his forehead against the ground. He could only hear his own taxed breathing, and the thought that played over and over in his mind was *Thank God I gave up smoking, thank God I gave up smoking, thank God -*

Then he could hear them, yelling back and forth to each other, in some cases bumping into each other. Hey, this is my row! and the sound heartened him. They were well away to his left and they sounded very poorly organized.

He took his handkerchief out of his shirt, folded it, and stuck it back in after looking at the wound. The bleeding seemed to have stopped in spite of the workout he had given it.

He rested a moment longer, and was suddenly aware that he felt good, physically better than he had in years, excepting the throb of his arm. He felt well exercised, and suddenly grappling with a crucial (no matter how innocent) problem after two years of trying to cope with the incubitic gremions that were sucking his marriage dry.

It wasn't right that he should feel this way, he told himself. He was in deadly peril of his life, and his wife had been carried off. She might be dead now. He tried to summon up Vicki's face and dispel some of the odd good feeling by doing so, but her face wouldn't come. What came was the red-haired boy with the knife in his throat.

He became aware of the corn fragrance in his nose now or around him. The wind through the tops of the plants made a sound like voices. Soothing. Whatever had been done to the name of the corn, it was now his protector.

But they were getting closer.

Running hunched over, he hurried up the trail he was in, crossed over, doubled back, and crossed over more rows. He tried to keep the voices away on his left, but as the afternoon progressed that became harder to do. The voices had grown faint and then the rustling sound of the corn obscured them altogether. He would run, then run again. The earth was hard packed, and his stockinginged feet left little or no trace.

When he stopped much later the sun was hanging over the horizon, his right reward inflamed, and when he looked at the watch he saw that it was quarter past seven. The sun had stained the countys a reddish gold, but here the shadows were dark and deep. He cocked his head, steaming. With the coming of sunset the wind had died entirely and the corn stood still, exposing its stems to growth into the warm air. If they were still in the corn they were either far away or just hunkered down and listening. But, but with a flick a bunch of kids, even crazy ones, could be quiet for this long. He suspected they had done the most foolish thing, regardless of the consequences for them, they had given up after one home.

He turned toward the setting sun, which had sunk between the ruffled clouds on the horizon, and began to walk. If he cut on a diagonal through the rows, always keeping the setting sun ahead of him, he would be home to strike Route 12 sooner or later.

The ache in his arm had settled into a dull throb that was nearly pleasant, and the good feeling was still with him. He decided that as long as he was here, he would let the good feeling exist in him without guilt. The guilt would return when he had to face the authorities and account for what had happened in Oathin. But that could wait.

He pressed through the corn, thinking he had never felt so keenly aware. Fifteen minutes later the sun was only a hemisphere poking over the horizon and he stopped again. His new awareness clicking into a pattern he didn't like. It was vaguely... well, vaguely frightening.

He cocked his head. The corn was rustling.

Burt had been aware of that for some time, but he had just put it together with something else. The wind was still. How could that be?

He looked around warily, half expecting to see the smiling boys in their Quaker coats creeping out of the corn, their knives clutched in their hands. Nothing of the sort. There was still that rustling noise. Off to the left.

He began to walk in that direction, not having to bush through the corn any more. The row was taking him in the direction he wanted to go naturally. The row ended up ahead. Ended? No, emptied out into some sort of clearing. The rustling was there.

He stopped, suddenly afraid.

The scent of the corn was strong enough to be overwhelming. The rows held on to the sun's heat and he became aware that he was plastered with sweat and chaff and thin spider strands of cornsilk. The bugs ought to be crawling all over him... but they weren't.

He stood still, staring towards the place where the corn opened out on to what looked like a large circle of bare earth.

There were no muggers or mosquitoes, no horse flies or chiggers... what he and Vicki had called "drive-in bugs" when they had been courting, he thought with sudden and unexpectedly sad nostalgia. And he hadn't seen a single crow. How was that for weird, a cornpatch with no crows?

In the last of the daylight he swept his eyes closely over the row of corn to his left. And saw that every leaf and stalk was perfect, which was just not possible. No yellow

blight. No lattered leaves, no caterpillar eggs, no burrows  
no —

His eyes widened.

*My God, there aren't any weeds!*

Not a single one. Every foot and a half the corn plants  
rose from the earth. There was no witchgrass, Jimson  
pikeweed, whorl's hair, or puke salad. Nothing.

Burt started up, eyes wide. The light in the west was  
fading. The rattered clouds had drawn back together.  
Below them the golden light had faded to pink and ochre. It  
would be dark soon enough.

It was time to go down to the clearing in the corn and see  
what was there. hadn't that been the plan all along? All the  
time he had thought he was cutting back to the highway.  
hadn't he been being led to this place?"

Dread in his belly, he went on down to the row and stood  
at the edge of the clearing. There was enough light for him  
to see what was here. He couldn't scream. There didn't  
seem to be enough air left in his lungs. He tottered in on  
legs like slats of splintered wood. His eyes bulged from his  
sweaty face.

"Vicky," he whispered. "Oh Vicky, my God."

She had been mounted on a crossbar like a hideous  
trophy, her arms held at the wrists and her legs at the ankles  
with twists of common barbed wire, seventy cents a yard at  
any hardware store in Nebraska. Her eyes had been ripped  
out. The sockets were filled with the moonflat of corn silk.  
Her jaws were wrenched open in a silent scream, her mouth  
filled with cornhusks.

On her left was a skeleton in a mouldering surface. The  
nude awbone grinned. The eye sockets seemed to stare at  
Burt vacantly, as if the one time minister of the Grace  
Baptist Church was saying, *It's worse bad being sacrificed*  
*by pagan dev' chidden in the corn is not so bad having*  
*your eyes ripped out of your skull according to the Law of*  
*Moses is not so bad —*

To the left of the skeleton in the surface was a second

skeleton, this one dressed in a rotting blue uniform. A hat hung over the skull shading the eyes, and on the peak of the cap was a greenish-tinged badge reading *police chief*

That was when Burt heard it coming, not the children but something much larger moving through the corn and towards the clearing. Not the children no. The children wouldn't venture into the corn at night. This was the holy place, the place of *He Who Walks Behind the Rows*

Jerking Burt turned to flee. The row he had entered the clearing by was gone. Closed up. All the rows had closed up. It was coming closer now and he could hear it pushing through the corn. He could hear it breathing. An ecstasy of superstitious terror seized him. It was coming. The corn on the far side of the clearing had suddenly darkened, as if a gigantic shadow had blotted it out

**Coming.**

**He Who Walks Behind the Rows**

It began to come into the clearing. Burt saw something huge barking up to the sky something green with terrible red eyes the size of footballs.

Something that smelled like dried cornhusks years in some dark barn.

He began to scream. But he did not scream long

Some time later, a bloated orange harvest moon came up

The children of the corn stood in the clearing at midday, looking at the two crucified skeletons and the two bodies

The bodies were not skeletons yet, but they would be in time. And here in the heartlands of Nebraska, in the corn, there was nothing but time

'Behold a dream came to me in the night, and the Lord did shew all this to me.'

They all turned to look at Isaac with dread and wonder even Ma achi. Isaac was only nine but he had been the Seer since the corn had taken David a year ago. David had been nineteen and he had walked into the corn on his birthday,

Just as dusk had come drifting down the summer rows

Now smad face grave under his round-crowned hat  
Isaac continued

And in my dream the Lord was a shadow that walked  
behind the rows and he spoke to me in the words he used to  
our other brothers years ago. He is much displeased with  
this sacrifice.'

They made a sighing sobbing noise and looked at the  
surrounding walls of green

And the Lord did say. Have I not given you a place of  
killing that you might make sacrifice there? And have I not  
shewn you favour. But this man has made a blasphemy  
with me and I have compelled him to sacrifice myself. Like  
the Blue Man and the false minister who escaped many  
years ago.'

The Blue Man the false minister they whispered  
and looked at each other uneasily

So now is the Age of Favour lowered from nineteen  
plantings and harvestings to eighteen. Isaac went on re-  
lentlessly. Yet be fruitful and multiply as the corn multi-  
plies that my favour may be shewn you and be upon  
you.'

Isaac ceased.

The eyes turned to Malaichi and Joseph the only two  
among this party who were eighteen. There were others  
back in town perhaps twenty in all.

They waited to hear what Malaichi would say. Malaichi  
who had led the hunt for Japheth who evermore would be  
known as Ahaz cursed the God. Malaichi had cut the throat  
of Ahaz and had thrown his body out of the corn so the foul  
body would not pollute the bright.

I obey the word of God. Malaichi whispered.

The corn seemed to sigh its approval.

In the weeks to come the girls would make many cornish  
crucifixes to ward off further evil.

And that night all of those now above the Age of Favour  
walked silently into the corn and went to the clearing to

## gain the continued favour of He Who Walks Behind the Rome

Goodbye Ma'achi,' Ruth called. She waved desolately. Her belly was big with Ma'achi's child and tears coursed silently down her cheeks. Ma'achi did not turn. His back was straight. The corn swallowed him.

Ruth turned away, still crying. She had concealed a secret hatred for the corn and sometimes dreamed of walking into it with a torch in each hand when dry September came and the stalks were dead and explosively combustible. But she also feared it. Out there, in the night something walked, and it saw everything — even the secrets kept in human hearts.

Dusk deepened into night. Around Gathin the corn rustled and whispered secretly. It was we I pleased.

## THE LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER

I got Katrina's letter yesterday, less than a week after my father and I got back from Los Angeles. It was addressed to Wilmington, Delaware, and I'd moved twice since then. People move around so much now, and I stunned how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. Her letter was rumpled and smudged, one of the corners dog-eared from handling. I read what was in it and the next thing I knew I was standing in the living room with the phone in my hand, getting ready to call Dad. I put the phone down with something like horror. He was an old man, and he'd had two heart attacks. Was I going to call him and tell about Katrina's letter so soon after we'd been in L.A.? To do that might very well have killed him.

So I didn't call. And I had no one I could tell—anything like that letter, it's too personal, not to anyone except a wife or a very close friend. I haven't made many close friends in the last few years, and my wife Helen and I divorced in 1971. What we exchange now are Christmas cards. How are you? How's the job? Have a Happy New Year.

I've been awake all night with it—with Katrina's letter. She could have put it on a postcard. There was only asingle sentence below the Dear Larry. But a sentence can mean enough. It can be enough.

I remembered my dad on the plane, his face seeming old and wasted in the harsh sunlight at 18,000 feet as we went west from New York. We had just passed over Omaha

according to the priest and Dad said. It's a lot further away than Brooks, Harry. There was a heavy sadness in his voice that made me uncomfortable because I couldn't understand it. I understood it better after getting Katrina's letter.

We grew up eight miles west of Omaha in a town called Hemingford. Harry, my dad, my mom, my sister, Katrina and me. I was two years older than Katrina, whom everyone called Katty. She was a beautiful child and a beautiful woman, even at eight. The year of the accident in the barn you could see that her crimson hair was never going to darken and that those eyes would always be a dark, Sean Connery blue. A look in those eyes and a man would be gone.

I guess you'd say we grew up hicks. My dad had three hundred acres of flat, rich land and he grew feed corn and raised cattle. Everybody just called it the home place. In those days all the roads were dirt except Interstate 80 and Nebraska Route 96, and a trip to town was something you waited three days for.

Nowadays I'm one of the best independent corporation lawyers in America, so they tell me, and I'd have to admit for the sake of honesty that I think they're right. A president of a large company once introduced me to his board of directors as his hired gun. I wear expensive suits and my shoe leather is the best. I've got three assistants on full-time pay, and I can call in another dozen if I need them. But in those days I walked up a dirt road to a one room school with books tied in a belt over my shoulder, and Katrina walked with me. Sometimes, in the spring, we went barefoot. That was in the days before you couldn't get served in a diner or shop in a market unless you were wearing shoes.

Later on my mother died. Katrina and I were in high school up at Columbia City then, and two years after that my dad lost the place and went to work selling tractors. It was the end of the family, although that didn't seem so bad then. Dad got along in his work, bought himself a dealership, and got tapped for a management position about

nine years ago I got a four year scholarship to the University of Nebraska and managed to earn something besides how to run the ball out of a slot right formation.

And Katrina? But it's her I want to tell you about.

It happened in the barn thing one Saturday in early November. To leave to the truth I can't pin down the actual year but like I was tell President Moon was at a bake fair in Columbia city and Dad had gone over to our nearest neighbor's (and that was seven miles away) to help the man fix a hayrake. There was supposed to be a hired man on the place but he had never showed up that day and my dad fired him not a month later.

Dad left me a list of chores to do and there were some for Kitty too and told us not to get to playing until they were all done. But that wasn't long. It was November and by that time of the year the make or break time had gone past. We'd make it again that year. We wouldn't always.

I remember that day very clearly. The sky was overcast and while I wasn't cold you could feel it was going to be cold wanting to get down to the business of frost and freeze snow and sleet. The tie rods were stripped. The animals were saggy and mopey. There seemed to be funny little draughts in the house that had never been there before.

On a day like that the only really nice place to be was the barn. It was warm filled with a pleasant mixed atmosphere of hay and fur and dung and with the mysterious chocking young sounds of the barnswallow high up in the third loft. If you cricked your neck up you could see the white November light coming through the chinks in the roof and try to spell your name. It was a game that really only seemed agreeable on overcast autumn days.

There was a ladder nail I tra... ssbeam high upon the third loft a ladder that went straight down to the main barn floor. We were both too frightened to because I was so and shaky. Dad had promised Mom a thousand times that he would pull it down and put up a stronger one but something else always seemed to come up when there was

time — helping a neighbour with his hayrake for instance. And the hired man was just not working out.

If you climbed up that rickety ladder — there were exactly forty-three rungs, Kitty and I had counted them enough to know — you ended up on a beam that was seventy feet above the straw-strewn barn floor. And then if you edged out along the beam about twelve feet, your knees jittering, your ankle joints creaking, your mouth dry and tasting like a used fuse, you stood over the haymow. And then you could jump off the beam and fall seventy feet straight down, with a horrid, hilarious dying swoop, into a huge soft bed of lush hay. It has a sweet smell, has does, and you'd come to rest in that same lot reborn summer with your stomach left behind you way up there in the middle of the air, and you'd feel — well, like Lazarus must have felt. You had taken the fall and lived to tell the tale.

It was a forbidden sport, all right. If we had been caught, my mother would have shrieked blue murder and my father would have laid on the strap, even at our advanced ages. Because of the ladder, and because if you happened to lose your balance and topple from the beam before you had edged out over the loose latheons of hay, you would fall to utter destruction on the hard planking of the barn floor.

But the temptation was just too great. When the cats are away — well, you know how that one goes.

That day started like all the others, a delicious feeling of dread mixed with antic parton. We stood at the foot of the ladder, looking at each other. Kitty's colour was high, her eyes darker and more sparkling than ever.

'Dare you,' I said.

'Prompts from Kitty. Dares go first.'

'Prompts from me. Girls go before boys.'

'Not if it's dangerous,' she said, casting her eyes down demurely as I everybody didn't know she was the second-biggest tomboy in Hemingford. But that was how she was about it. She would go, but she wouldn't go first.

'Okay,' I said. 'Here I go.'

I was ten that year and then as Scratch the demon, about  
one hundred and twenty pounds. Kitty was eight, and twenty pounds lighter.  
The ladder had always been before we thought it would  
always hold us again, which is a philosophy that gets men  
and nations in trouble time after time.

I could feel it that day, beginning to shudder around a  
little bit in the dusty barn air as I climbed higher and higher.  
As always about halfway up, I entertain'd a vision of what  
would happen to me if I suddenly let go and gave up the  
ghost. But I kept going until I was able to clasp my hands  
around the beam and boost myself up and look down.

Kitty's face turned up to watch me, was a small white  
oval. In her faded checked shirt and blue denims, she  
looked like a doll. Above me still higher, in the dusty  
reaches of the eaves, the swallows cooed me lowly.

Again, by rote

Hi down there! I called, my voice floating down to her  
on motes of chaff.

'Hi, up there!'

I stood up, swayed back and forth a little. As always  
there seemed suddenly to be strange currents in the air that  
had not existed down below. I could hear my own heartbeat  
as I began to climb along with my arms held out for balance.  
Once a swallow had swooped close by my head. During this  
part of the adventure, and in drawing back I had almost lost  
my balance. I lived in fear of the same thing happening  
again.

But not this time. At last I stood above the safety of the  
barn. Now looking down was not so much frightening as  
sensual. There was a moment of anticipation. Then I  
stepped off into space, holding my nose for a fact, and as if  
always did, the sudden grip of gravity yanking me down  
brutally, making me plummet, made me feel like vomiting.  
*'Oh, I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Let me back up!'*

Then I hit the hay, shot into it like a projectile, its sweet  
and dusty smell, blowing up air and me, still going down  
as if into heavy water, coming slowly to rest buried in the

stuff. As always, I could feel a sneeze building up in my nose. And hear a frightened field mouse or two fleeing for a more serene section of the haymow. And feel in that curious way, that I had been reborn. I remember Katty telling me once that after diving into the hay she felt fresh and new like a baby. I shrugged it off at the time, sort of knowing what she meant, sort of not knowing, but since I got her letter I think about that too.

I climbed out of the hay, sort of swimming through it until I could climb out onto the barn floor. I had hay down my pants and down the back of my shirt. It was on my sneakers and sticking to my eyebrows. Hayseeds in my hair? You bet.

She was halfway up the ladder by then, her gold pigtails bouncing against her shoulderblades, climbing through a dusty shaft of light. On other days that light might have been as bright as her hair, but on this day her pigtails had no competition — they were easily the most colourful thing up there.

I remember thinking that I didn't like the way the ladder was swaying back and forth. It seemed like it had never been so loosey-goosey.

Then she was on the beam, high above me — now I was the small one, my face was the small, white upturned oval as her voice floated down on errant shafts stirred up by my leap:

Hi, down there!

Hi, up there!

She edged along the beam, and my heart loosened a little in my chest when I judged she was over the safety of the hay. It always did, although she was more graceful than I was — and more athletic, if that doesn't sound like too strange a thing to say about your kid sister.

She stood, poised on the toes of her old low-topped Keds, hands out in front of her. And then she swanned. Talk about things you can't forget, things you can't describe. Well, I can describe it — in a way. But not in a way

that will make you understand how beautiful that was, how perfect, one of the few things in my life that seem utterly real, utterly true. No, I can't tell you that. I don't have the skill with either my pen or my tongue.

For a moment she seemed to hang in the air, as if borne up by one of those mysterious updraughts that only existed in the third loft, a bright swallow with golden plumage such as Nebraska has never seen since. She was Kitty, my sister, her arms swept behind her and her back arched, and how I lived her for that beat of time!

Then she came down and ploughed into the hay and out of sight. An explosion of chaff and giggles rose out of the hole she made. I'd forgotten about how rickety the ladder had looked with her on it, and by the time she was out, I was halfway up again.

I tried to swear myself, but the fear grabbed me the way it always did, and my swear turned into a cannonball. I think I never believed the hay was there the way it's believed it.

How long did the game go on. Hard to tell. But I looked up some ten or twelve dives later and saw the light had changed. Our mom and dad were due back and we were all covered with chaff, as good as a signed confession. We agreed on one more turn each.

Coming up first, I felt the adder moving beneath me and I could hear - very faintly - the whining rasp of old rats loosening up in the wood. And for the first time I was really, really scared. I think if I'd been closer to the bottom I would have gone down and that would have been the end of it, but the beam was closer and seemed safer. Three runs from the top the whine of pulling rats grew louder and I was suddenly cold with terror with the certainty that I had pushed it too far.

Then I had the splinter beam in my hands, taking my weight off the adder, and there was a cold, unpleasing sweat starting the twigs of hay to my forehead. The fun, the game was gone.

I hurried out over the hay and dropped off. Even the

pleasurable part of the drop was gone. Coming down, I imagined how I'd feel if that was solid barn planking coming up to meet me instead of the yielding give of the hay.

I came out to the middle of the barn to see Kitty hurrying up the ladder. I called. "Hey, come down! It's not safe!"

"If I hold me!" she called back confidently. "I'm lighter than you!"

Kitty

But that never got finished. Because that was when the ladder let go.

It went with a rotted splintering crack. I cried out and Kitty screamed. She was about where I had been when I'd become conscious. I'd pressed my luck too far.

The rung she was standing on gave way, and then both sides of the ladder split. For a moment the ladder below her, which had broken at the very tree, looked like a ponderous insect, a praying mantis or a ladderbug, which had just decided to walk off.

Then it toppled, hitting the barn floor with a flat clap that raised dust and caused the cows to moo worriedly. One of them kicked at its stable door.

Kitty uttered a high-piercing scream.

*Larry! Larry! Help me!*

I knew what had to be done. I saw right away. I was terribly afraid, but not quite scared out of my wits. She was better than sixty feet above me, her blue-veined legs kicking wildly at the blank air, then barnswallows circling above her. I was scared all right. And you know I still can't watch a circus aerial act, not even on TV. It makes my stomach feel weak.

But I knew what had to be done.

*Kitty, I bawled up at her. Just hold still! Hold still!*

She obeyed me instantly. Her legs stopped kicking and she hung straight down, her small hands clutching the last rung on the ragged end of the ladder like an acrobat whose trapeze has stopped.

I ran to the haymow, clutched up a double handful of the stuff, ran back and dropped it. I went back again. And again. And again.

I really don't remember it after that, except the hay got up my nose and I started sneezing and couldn't stop. I ran back and forth, hounding a haystack where the foot of the ladder had been. It was a very small haystack. Looking at it, then looking at her hanging so far above it, you might have thought of one of those cartoons where the guy jumps three hundred feet into a water glass.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Larry, I can't hold on much longer. Her voice was high and despairing.

Kitty, you've got to! You've got to hold on.

Back and forth. Hay down my shirt. Back and forth. The haysack was high as my chin now, but the haymow we had been diving into was twenty-five feet deep. I thought that if she only broke her legs it would be getting off cheap. And I knew if she missed the hay altogether, she would be killed. Back and forth.

*Larry, The rump, it's letting go!*

I could hear the steady rasping cry of the rump pulling free under her weight. Her legs began to kick again in panic, but if she was thrashing like that, she would surely miss the hay.

No! I yelled. No! Stop that! Just let go. Let go, Kitty. Because it was too late for me to get any more hay. Too late for anything except blind hope.

She let go and dropped the second I told her to. She came straight down like a knife. It seemed to me that she dropped forever, her gold pigtails standing straight up from her head, her eyes shut, her face as pale as china. She didn't scream. Her hands were locked in front of her hips, as if she was praying.

And she struck the hay right in the centre. She went down out of sight in it. Hay flew up all around as if a shell had struck, and I heard the thump of her body hitting the

boards. The sound a loud thud sent a deadly chill down me. It had been too loud, much too loud. But I had to see.

Starting to cry, I pounced on the haystack and pulled it apart, flinging the straw behind me in great handfuls. A blue-jeaned leg came to light then a plaid shirt... and then Kitty's face. It was deadly pale and her eyes were shut. She was dead. I knew it as I looked at her. The world went grey for me. November grey. The only things that with any colour were her pyjamas, bright gold.

And then the deep blue of her irises as she opened her eyes.

"Kitty?" My voice was hoarse, husky, unbelieving. My throat was coated with haychaff. "Kitty?"

"Larry?" she asked, bewildered. "Am I alive?"

I picked her out of the hay and hugged her and she put her arms around my neck and hugged me back.

"You're alive," I said. "You're alive, you're alive."

She had broken her left ankle and that was all. When Dr. Pedersen, the GP from Columbia City, came out to the barn with my father and me, looked up into the shadows for a long time. The last rung on the ladder still hung there as an ant from the nail.

He looked as I said for a long time. A miracle, he said to my father, and then kicked disdainfully at the hay I'd put down. He went out to his dusty DeSoto and drove away.

My father's hand came down on my shoulder. "We're going to the woodshed, Larry," he said in a very calm voice. "I believe you know what's going to happen there."

"Yes, sir," I whispered.

"Every time I whack you, Larry, I want you to thank God your sister is still alive."

"Yes, sir."

Then we went. He whacked me plenty of times, so many times I ate standing up for a week and with a cushion on my chair for two weeks after that. And every time he whacked me with his big red calloused hand, I thanked God.

In a loud, loud voice. By the last two or three whacks I was pretty sure He was beating me.

They let me in to see her just before bedt me. There was a catbird outside her window, I remember that. Her foot all wrapped up was propped on a board.

She looked at me so long and so knowingly that I was uncomfortable. Then she said, "Hav. You put down hav."

"Course I did. I b'uried. What else would I do? Once the ladder broke there was no way to get up there."

"I didn't know what you were doing," she said.

"You must have. I was right under you, for cripe's sake!"

"I didn't dare look down," she said. "I was too scared. I had my eyes shut the whole time."

I stared at her, thunderstruck.

"You didn't know? Didn't know what I was doing?"

She shook her head.

"And when I told you to let go you . . . you just did it?"

She nodded.

"Kitty, how could you do that?"

She looked at me with those deep blue eyes. "I knew you must have been doing something to fix it," she said. "You're my big brother. I knew you'd take care of me."

"Oh, Kitty, you don't know how close it was."

I had put my hands over my face. She sat up and took them away. She kissed my cheek. "No," she said. "But I knew you were down there. Gee am I sleepy! I'll see you tomorrow, Larry. I'm going to have a cast. Dr. Petersen says."

She had the cast on for a little less than a month, and all her classmates signed it—she even got the to sign it. And when it came off, that was the end of the barn incident. My father replaced the ladder up to the third loft with a new, strong one, but I never climbed up to the beam and jumped off into the haymow again. So far as I know, Kitty didn't either.

It was the end, but somehow not the end. Somehow it never ended until nine days ago when Kitty jumped from the top storey of an insurance building in Los Angeles. I have the clipping from the L.A. Times in my wallet. I guess I always carry it, not in the good way you carry snapshots of people you want to remember, or theatre tickets from a really good show, or part of the programme from a World Series game. I carry that clipping the way you carry something heavy, because carrying it is your work. The headline reads: *CAT / GIRL SWAN DRAVEN TO HER DEATH*

We grew up. That's all I know, other than facts that don't mean anything. She was going to go to business college in Omaha, but in the summer after she graduated from high school, she won a beauty contest and married one of the judges. It sounds like a dirty joke, doesn't it? My Kitty.

While I was in law school, she got divorced and wrote me a long letter, ten pages or more, telling me how it had been how messy I had been, how it might have been better if she could have had a child. She asked me if I could come. But going a week in law school is like rising a term in liberal arts undergraduate. Those guys are greyhounds. If you lose sight of the little mechanical rabbit, it's gone forever.

She moved out to L.A. and got married again. When that one broke up I was out of law school. There was another letter, a shorter one, more bitter. She was never going to get stuck on that merry go round, she told me. It was a fix job. The only way you could catch the brass ring was to tumble off the horse and crack your skull. If that was what the price of a free ride was, who wanted it? PS. Can you come, Larry? It's been a while.

I wrote back and told her I'd love to come, but I couldn't. I had landed a job in a high pressure firm, low guy on the totem pole, all the work and none of the credit. If I was going to make it up to the next step, it would have to be that year. That was my long letter, and it was all about my career.

I answered all of her letters. But I could never really believe that it was really Kitty who was writing them. You know no more than I could really believe that she has was really there. until it broke my fall at the bottom of the drop and saved my life. I couldn't believe that my sister and the beaten woman who signed Kitty in a circle at the bottom of her letters were really the same person. My sister was a girl with pigtails still without breasts.

She was the one who stopped writing. I'd get Christmas cards, birthday cards, and my wife would reciprocate. Then we got divorced and I moved and just forgot. The next Christmas and the birthday after, the cards came through the forwarding address. The first one. And I kept thinking Gee, I've got to write Kitty and tell her that I've missed. But I never did.

But as I've told you, those are facts that don't mean anything. The only things that matter are that we grew up and she swanned from that insurance building and that Kitty was the one who always believed the bay would be there. & it was the one who had said, I knew you must be doing something to fix it. Those things matter. And Kitty's letter.

People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-out addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. She's printed her return address in the upper left corner of the envelope, the place she'd been staying at until she jumped. A very nice apartment building on Van Nuys. Dad and I went there to pick up her things. The landlady was nice. She had liked Kitty.

The letter was postmarked two weeks before she died. It would have got to me a long time before, if not for the forwarding addresses. She must have got tired of waiting.

*Dear Larry*

*I've been thinking about it a lot lately... and what I've decided is that it would have been better for me if*

*that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down*

*Your,  
Kitty*

Yes I guess she must have gotten tired of waiting I'd rather her believe that than think of her deciding I must have forgotten I wouldn't want her to think that, because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run

But not even that is the reason sleep comes so hard now When I close my eyes and start to drift off I see her coming down from the third loft, her eyes wide and dark blue, her body arched her arms swept up behind her

She was the one who always knew the hay would be there

## THE MAN WHO LOVED FLOWERS

On an early evening in May of 1961, a young man with his hand in his pocket walked briskly up New York's Third Avenue. The air was soft and beautiful, the sky was darkening by slow degrees from blue to the calm and lovely violet of dusk. There are people who love the city, and this was one of the nights that made them love it. Every one standing in the doorways of the delicatessens and dry cleaning shops and restaurants seemed to be smiling. An old lady pushing two bags of groceries in an old baby pram glanced at the young man and hailed him. Hey, beautiful! The young man gave her a half smile and raised his hand in a wave.

*She passed on her way, thinking. He is nice.*

He had that look about him. He was dressed in a light grey suit, the narrow tie pulled down a little, his top coat buttoned undone. His hair was dark and cut short. His complexion was fair, his eyes a light blue. Not an extraordinary face, but on this soft spring evening, on this avenue, in May of 1961, he was beautiful, and the old woman found herself thinking with a moment's sweet nostalgia that in spring anyone can be beautiful — if they're hurryng to meet the one of their dreams for dinner and maybe dancing after. Spring is the only season when most girls never seems to turn bitter, and she went on her way glad that she had spoken to him and glad he had returned the compliment by raising his hand in half salute.

The young man crossed Sixty-third Street, walking with the bounce in his step and that same half smile on his lips. Part

was up the block an old man stood beside a chipped green handcart lined with flowers the predominant colour was yellow a few lemons and late crocuses. The old man also had carnations and a few hothouse tea roses mostly yellow and white. He was eating a pretzel and listening to a bulky transistor radio that was sitting kitty corner on his handcart.

The radio poured out bad news that no one listened to a hamme, that later was shot on the nose. JFK had declared that the situation in a little Asian country called Vietnam the guy reading the news called it would bear watching an unidentified woman had been pulled from the East River a grand jury had failed to indict a crime over and in the current city administration's war on heroin the Russians had exploded a nuclear device. None of it seemed real none of it seemed to matter. The air was soft and sweet. Two men with beer bottles stood outside a bakery pushing nickels and ribbing each other. Spring trembled on the edge of summer and in the city summer is the season of dreams.

The young man passed the flower stand and the sound of the bad news faded. He hesitated looked over his shoulder and thought it over. He reached into his coat pocket and touched the something in there again. For a moment his face seemed puzzled, kindly, almost haunted, and then as his hand left the pocket it regained its former expression of eager expectation.

He turned back to the flower stand smiling. He would bring her some flowers that would please her. He loved to see her eyes light up with surprise and joy when he brought her a surprise little things because he was far from rich. A box of candy. A bracelet. Once only a bag of Valencia oranges because he knew they were his mother's favourite.

My young friend the flower vendor said as the man in the grey suit came back running his eyes over the stock in the handcart. The vendor was maybe sixty-eight, wearing a torn grey knitted sweater and a soft cap in spite of the

warmth of the evening. His face was a map of wrinkles, his eyes were deep in pouches, and a cigarette jittered between his fingers. But he also remembered how it was to be young in the spring, young and so much in love that you practically zoomed everywhere. The vendor's face was normally sour, but now he smiled a little, just as the old woman pushing the groceries had, because this guy was such an obvious case. He brushed pretzel crumbs from the front of his buggy sweater and thought: If this kid were sick, they'd have him in intensive care right now.

"How much are your flowers?" the young man asked.

"I make you up a nice bouquet for a dollar. Those tea roses, they're hothouse. Cost a little more—seventy cents apiece. I sed you half a dozen for three dollars and fifty cents."

"Expensive," the young man said.

"Nothing good comes cheap, my young friend. Didn't your mother ever teach you that?"

The young man grinned; she might have mentioned it at that?

"Sure. Sure she did. I give you half a dozen, two red, two yellow, two white. Can I do no better than that? Can I? Put in some baby's breath—they love that—and fill it out with some fern. Nice. Or you can have the bouquet for a dollar."

"They?" the young man asked, still smoking.

"My young friend," the flower vendor said, flicking his cigarette butt into the gutter and returning the smile, "no one buys flowers for themselves in May. It's like a national law. You understand what I mean?"

The young man thought of Norma, her happy, surprised eyes and her gentle smile, and he ducked his head a little. "I guess I do at that," he said.

"Sure you do. What do you say?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I'm gonna tell you what I think. Hey! Advice is still free, isn't it?"

The young man smiled and said 'I guess it's the only thing left that is'

You're damn tooting it's the flower vendor said  
Okay my young friend If the flowers are for your mother  
you get her the bouquet A few jonquils a few crocuses  
some lily of the valley She don't spoil it by saying 'Oh  
Junior I love them how much did they cost oh that's too  
much don't you know enough not to throw your money  
around?"

The young man threw his head back and laughed

The Vendor said But if it's your girl that's a different  
thing my son and you know it You bring her the tea roses  
and she don't turn into an accountant You take my  
meaning? Hey! she's gonna throw her arms around your  
neck

'I'll take the tea roses' the young man said and this time  
it was the flower vendor's turn to laugh The two men  
pitching nickels glanced over smirking

'Hey kid! one of them called You wanna buy a wed-  
ding cheap? I'll sell you mine I don't want it no  
more'

The young man grinned and brushed to the roots of his  
dark hair

The flower vendor picked out six tea roses snipped the  
stems a little spritzed them with water and wrapped them  
in a large conical swirl

'Tonight's weather looks just the way you'd want it' the  
radio said Fair and mild, temps in the mid to upper sixties  
perfect for a little rooftop stargazing if you're the romantic  
type Enjoy, Greater New York enjoy'

The flower vendor Scotch-taped the seam of the paper  
swirl and advised the young man to tell his lady that a little  
sugar added to the water she put them in would preserve  
them longer

'I'll tell her,' the young man said He held out a five-  
dollar bill 'Thank you'

'Just doing the job' my young friend, the vendor said

giving him a dollar and two quarters. His smile grew a bit  
wider. Give her a kiss for me.

On the radio, the Four Seasons began singing. Sherry  
The young man pocketed his change and went on up the  
street eyes wide and alert and eager looking not so much  
at and him at the idle chittering and flowing up and down  
Third Avenue as toward and ahead anticipating. But  
certain things did impinge: a mother putting a baby in a  
wagon, the baby's face crimsoned with ice cream, a  
little girl jumping rope and a sunburned mother thyme  
Betty and Henry up in a tree. **KISSING** first comes  
love, then comes marriage, here comes Henry with a barn  
arrangement. Two women stood outside a washateria smoking  
and comparing pregnancies. A group of men were looking  
in a hardware store window at a soccer set. It was a  
four figure price tag. A baseball game was on and at the  
players faces looked green. The playing field was a vague  
steamy grayish cloud and the New York Mets were leading  
the Philadelphia A's one to the top of the ninth.

He walked on carrying the flowers unaware that the two  
women outside the washateria had stopped talking for a  
moment and had watched him wistfully as he walked by  
with his paper of tea roses. The days of receiving flowers  
were long over. He was unaware of a young traffic cop who  
stopped, he calls at the intersection, Third and Sixty-ninth  
with a blast on his whistle to let him cross. The cop was  
engaged himself and recognized the dreamy expression in  
the young man's face from his own shaving mirror where  
he had often seen it lately. He was unaware of the two  
teen aged girls who passed him going the other way and  
then clutched the roses red and green.

At Seventy-third Street he stopped and turned right.  
This street was a little darker, lined with brownstones and  
walk-down restaurants with Italian names. Three blocks  
down and the game was going on in the fading light. The  
young man did not go that far. Half a block down he turned  
into a narrow lane.

Now the stars were out, glistening softly, and the lane was dark and shadowy. Lined with vague shape of garbage cans, the young man was alone now, no, not quite. A wavering yowl rose in the purple gloom, and the young man frowned. It was some tomcat's love song, and there was nothing pretty about that.

He walked more slowly, and glanced at his watch. It was quarter of eight and Norma should be just

Then he saw her, coming towards him from the court yard, wearing dark blue slacks and a sailor blouse that made his heart ache. It was always a surprise seeing her for the first time. It was always a sweet shock. She looked so young.

Now his smile shone out, *radiated out*, and he walked faster.

Norma, he said.

She looked up and smiled, but as they drew together, the smile faded.

His own smile trembled a little, and he felt a moment's disquiet. Her face over the sailor blouse suddenly seemed blurred. It was getting darker now. Could he have been in staken? Sure, not. It was Norma.

I brought you flowers, he said, in a happy relief, and handed the paper sp'l to her.

She looked at them for a moment, smiled, and handed them back.

Thank you, but you're mistaken, she said. My name is

Norma, he whispered, and pulled the short-handled hammer out of his coat pocket where it had been all along. They're for you, Norma. It was always for you, all for you.'

She backed away, her face a round white blur, her mouth an opening black O of terror, and she wasn't Norma. Norma was dead, she had been dead for ten years, and it didn't matter because she was going to scream and he swung the hammer to stop the scream, to kill the scream.

and as he swung the hammer the spilt of flowers fell out of his hand the spilt spilled and broke open spilling red, white, and yellow tea roses beside the dented trash cans where the cats made aien love in the dark screaming in love screaming screaming

He swung the hammer and she didn't scream but she might scream because she wasn't Norma none of them were Norma and he swung the hammer swung the hammer swung the hammer she wasn't Norma and so he swung the hammer as he had done five other times

Some unknown time later he slipped the hammer back into his inner coat pocket and hacked away from the dark shadow sprawled on the cobblestones away from the tier of tea roses by the garbage cans He turned and left the narrow lane It was full dark now The stickball players had gone in If there were bloodstains on his suit they wouldn't show not in the dark not in the soft late spring dark and her name had not been Norma but he knew what his name was It was . . . was

### *Love*

His name was love and he walked these dark streets because Norma was waiting for him And he would find her Some day soon

He began to smile A bounce came into his step as he walked on down Seventy-third Street A middle aged married couple sitting on the steps of their building watched him go by head cocked eyes afar away, a half smile on his lips When he had passed by the woman said How come you never look that way any more?

### *Huh?*

Nothing she said but she watched the young man in the grey suit disappear into the gloom of the encroaching night and thought that if there was anything more beautiful than springtime it was young love

## ONE FOR THE ROAD

It was quarter past ten and Herb Tooklander was thinking of closing for the night when the man in the fancy overcoat and the white staring face burst into Tokey's Bar which lies in the northern part of Falmouth. It was the tenth of January just about the time most folks are learning to live comfortably with all the New Year's resolutions they broke and there was one hell of a north easter blowing outside. Six inches had come down before dark and I had been going hard and heavy since then. Twice we had seen Bill Larabee go by high in the cab of the town plough and the second time Tokey ran him out a beer - an act of pure charity my mother would have called it and my God knows she put down enough of Tokey's beer in her time. Bill told him they were keeping ahead of it on the main road but the side ones were closed and apt to stay that way until next morning. The radio in Portland was forecasting another foot and a forty mile an hour wind to pile up the drifts.

There was just Tokey and me in the bar listening to the wind howl around the eaves and watching it dance the fire around on the hearth. Have one for the road, Boz! Tokey says. I'm gonna shut her down.

He poured me one and he raise one and that's when the door cracked open and this stranger staggered in snow up to his shoulders and in his hair like he had rolled around in perfect one's sugar. The wind howled a sand bar sheet of snow in after him.

Close the door. Tookey roars at him. Was you born in a  
barn?"

I've never seen a man who looked that scared. He was  
like a horse that's spent an afternoon eating fire netties. His  
eyes rolled towards Tookey and he said. My wife... my  
daughter... and he collapsed on the floor in a dead faint.

"Holy Joe," Tookey says. "Close the door. Booth would  
you?"

I went and shut it, and pushing it against the wind was  
something of a chore. Tookey was down on one knee  
holding the fellow's head up and patting his cheeks. I got  
over to him and saw right off that it was nasty. His face was  
fiery red, but there were grey blotches here and there, and  
when you've lived through winters in Maine since the time  
Woodrow Wilson was President, as I have, you know those  
grey blotches mean frostbite.

"Fainted," Tookey said. "Get the brandy off the backbar  
will you?"

I got it and came back. Tookey had opened the fellow's  
eyes. He had come around a little, his eyes were half open  
and he was muttering something too low to catch.

"Pour a captol," Tookey says.

"Just a cap'," I ask him.

"That stuff's dynamite," Tookey says. "No sense over  
loading his carb."

I poured out a captol and looked at Tookey. He nodded.  
Straight down the hatch.

I poured it down. It was a remarkable thing to watch. The  
man trembled a little and began to cough. His face got  
redder. His eyelids, which had been at half-mast, flew up  
like window shades. I was a bit alarmed, but Tookey only  
sat him up like a big baby and clapped him on the back.

"The man started toretch," and Tookey clapped him again.  
"Head on to it," he says, "that brandy comes near."

The man coughed some more, but it was diminishing  
now. I got my first good look at him. City fellow, all right  
and from somewhere south of Boston, at a guess. He was

wearing kid gloves, expensive but thin. There were probably some more of those greyish white patches on his hands and he would be lucky not to lose a finger or two. His coat was fancy all right, a three hundred dollar job if ever I'd seen one. He was wearing tiny little boots that hardly came up over his ankles, and I began to wonder about his toes.

'Better,' he said.

'All right,' Tookee said. 'Can you come over to the fire?' 'My wife and my daughter,' he said. 'They're out there in the storm.'

'From the way you came in, I didn't figure they were at home watching the TV,' Tookee said. 'You can tell us by the fire as easy as here on the floor. Hook on. Booth.'

He got to his feet, but a little groan came out of him and his mouth twisted down in pain. I wondered about his toes again, and I wondered why God felt he had to make fools from New York City who would try driving around in southern Maine at the height of a north east blizzard. And I wondered if his wife and his little girl were dressed any warmer than him.

We hiked him across to the fire place and got him sat down in a rocker that used to be Missus Tookee's favourite until she passed on in '74. It was Missus Tookee that was responsible for most of the place, which had been written up in *Down East* and the *Sunday Telegram* and even once in the Sunday supplement of the *Boston Globe*. It's really more of a public house than a bar, with its big wooden floor pegged together rather than nailed, the maple bar, the old barn raftered ceiling, and the monstrous big fieldstone hearth. Missus Tookee started to get some ideas in her head after the *Down East* article came out, wanted to start calling the place Tookee's Inn or Tookee's Rest, and I admit I has sort of a Columbia ring to it, but I prefer plain old Tookee's Bar. It's one thing to get uppish in the summer, when the state's full of tourists, another thing altogether in the winter, when you and your neighbours

have to trade together. Another had been plenty of winter nights like this one that Tooley and I had spent all alone togeher drinking scotch and water or just a few beers. My own Victoria passed on in '73 and Tooley's was a place to go where there were enough voices to mute the steady ticking of the death watch beetle even I there was just Tooley and me I was enough I wouldn't have felt the same about it if the place had been Tooley's Rest. It's crazy but it's true.

We got this fellow in front of the fire and he got the shakes harder than ever. He haggard in to his knees and his teeth chattered together and a few drops of clear mucus spewed off the end of his nose. I think he was starting to realize that another fifteen minutes out there might have been enough to kill him. It's not the snow it's the wind ch factor. It's in your heat.

Where'd you go all the road? Tooley asked him.

Six miles or so south of here he said.

Tooley and I stared at each other and all of a sudden I felt cold. Cold as I ever.

You sure? Tooley demanded. You came six miles through the snow?

He nodded. I checked the odometer when we came through town. I was following directions going to see my wife's sister in Cumberland never been there before we're from New Jersey.

New Jersey. If there's anyone more purely foolish than a New Yorker it's a fool from New Jersey.

Six miles you're sure? Tooley demanded.

Pretty sure yeah I found the turn-off but it was drifted in. It was.

Tooley grabbed him. In the shifting glow of the fire his face looked pale and strained older than his sixty-six years by ten. You made a right turn?

Right turn yeah My wife

Did you see a sign?

Sign? He looked up at Tooley blankly and wiped the

end of his nose. Of course I did. It was on my instructions. Take Jointner Avenue through Jerusalem's Lot to the 295 entrance ramp. He looked from Tookey to me and back to Tookey again. Outside the wind whistled and howled and moaned through the eaves. 'Wasn't that right, mister?'

'The Lot.' Tookey said, almost too soft to hear. 'Oh my God.'

'What's wrong?' the man said. His voice was rising. 'Wasn't that right? I mean the road looked drifted in but I thought... if there's a town there the ploughs will be out and... and then I...

'He just sort of faded off.'

'Booth.' Tookey said to me low. 'Get on the phone. Call the sheriff.'

'Sure, this fool from New Jersey says, that's right. What's wrong with you guys anyway? You look like you saw a ghost.'

'Tookey said, 'No ghosts in the Lot, mister. Did you tell them to stay in the car?'

'Sure I did,' he said, sounding injured. 'I'm not crazy. Well, you couldn't have proved it by me.'

'What's your name?' I asked him. 'For the sheriff.'

'Lumley,' he says. Gerard Lumley.

He started in with Tookey again, and I went across to the telephone. I picked it up and heard nothing but dead silence. I hit the cut-off buttons a couple of times. Still nothing.

I came back. Tookey had poured Gerard Lumley another tot of brandy and this one was going down him a lot smoother.

'Was he out?' Tookey asked.

'Phone's dead.'

'Hot damn.' Tookey says, and we look at each other. Outside the wind gusted up, throwing snow against the windows.

Lumley looked from Tookey to me and back again.

'Well, haven't either of you got a car?' he asked. 'The

artillery was back in his voice. They've got to run the engine or the heater. I only had about a quarter of a tank of gas and it took me an hour and what's to do? Look who's ~~answering me~~! He stood up and grabbed Turkey's shirt.

Mister Turkey says I think you hand just ran away from your brains there.

Turkey looked at his hand at Turkey then dropped it. Man! he howled. He made it sound like a dirty word about the body smother. All right, he said. Where's the nearest gas station? They must have a tow truck.

Nearest gas station is in Hammon Center, I said. That's three miles down the road from here.

Thanks, he said, a bit sarcastic, and headed for the door buttoning his coat.

Won't be open though, I added.

He turned back slowly and looked at us.

What are you talking about, old man?

He's trying to tell you that the station in the Center belongs to B. S. Lambbee and B. S. is out driving the plough you damn fool, Turkey says patiently. Now why don't you come back here and sit down before you bust a gut?

He came back looking dazed and frightened. Are you telling me you can't... that there isn't...?

I aint telling you nothing, Turkey says. You're doing all the telling and if you stopped for a minute we could think this over.

What's this town Jerusalem's Lot? he asked. Why was the road drifted in? And no lights on anywhere?

I said Jerusalem's Lot burned out two years back.

And they never rebuilt? He looked like he didn't believe it.

It appears that way, I said, and looked at Turkey. What are we going to do about this?

Can't leave them out there, he said.

I got closer to him. Turkey had wandered away to look at the plow in the snowy night.

What'd they've been got at? I asked.

That may be, he said. But we don't know it for sure. I've got my Bible on the shelf. You still wear your Pope's medal?"

I pulled the crucifix out of my shirt and showed him. I was born and raised Congregational, but most folks who live around the Lot wear something, crocheted St Christopher's medal, rosary, something. Because two years ago, in the span of one dark October month the Lot went bad. Some times late at night when there were just a few regulars drawn up at Lund Tookey's bar, people would talk it over. Talk around it is more like the truth. You see, people in the Lot started to disappear. First a few, then a few more, then a whole slew. The schools closed. The town shied empty for most of a year. Oh, a few people moved in, mostly damn fools from out of state, like this fine specimen here, drawn by the low property values, I suppose. But they didn't last. A lot of them moved out a month or two after they'd moved in. The others... well, they disappeared. Then the town burned flat. It was at the end of a long dry fall. They figure it started up by the Marsten House on the hill that overlooked Jointner Avenue, but no one knows how it started, not to this day. It burned out of control for three days. After that, for a time, things were better. And then they started again.

I only heard the word vampires mentioned once. A crazy pub truck driver named Richie Messina from over Freeport was way in Tookey's that night, pretty well liquored up. Jesus Christ, this stampeder roared, standing up about nine feet tall in his wool pants and his plaid shirt and his leather lopped boots. Are you also damn afraid to say it out? Vampires. That's what you're all thinking, isn't it. Jesus jumped-up-Christ in a chariot-driven's occur. Just like a bunch of kids scared of the movies. You know what there is down there in Salem's Lot. Want me to tell you? Want me to tell you?"

Dr. te I. Richie Tookey says, It had got real quiet in the bar. You could hear the fire popping, and outside the soft

drift of November rain coming down in the dark. You got the floor.'

'What you got over there is your basic wild dog pack. Richie Messina, el-sus. That's what you got. That area is of old women who love a good spook story. Why, for eighty bucks I'd go up there and spend the night in what's left of that haunted house you real so worried about. Well, what about it? Anyone want to put it up?'

But nobody would. Richie was a loudmouth and a mean drunk and no one was going to shed any tears at his wake but none of us were willing to see him go into Salem's Lot after dark.

'Be screwed to the bunch of you,' Richie says. 'I got my four ten in the trunk of my Chevy, and that'll stop anything in Falmouth, Comber and/or Jerusalem's Lot. And that's where I'm goin'.'

He slammed out of the bar and no one said a word for a while. Then Lamont Henry says real quiet. That's the last time anyone's gonna see Richie Messina. Holy God. And Lamont, raised to be a Methodist from his mother's knee, crossed himself.

He left either off and change his mind. Tookey said, but he sounded uneasy. He'll be back by cousin time, makin' out it was all a joke.

But Lamont had the right of that one, because no one ever saw Richie again. His wife told the state cops she thought he'd gone to Florida to beat a circuit up agency but you could see the truth of the thing in her eyes - sick stated eyes. Not long after, she moved away to Rhode Is. Maybe she thought Richie was going to come after her some dark night. And I'm not the man to say he might not have done.

Now Tookey was looking at me and I was looking at Tookey as I stuffed my crucifix back into my shirt. I never felt so old or so scared in my life.

Tookey said again. 'We can't just leave them out there, Booth.'

Yeah. I know.

We looked at each other for a moment longer, and then he reached out and gripped my shoulder. You're a good man, Booth. That was enough to back me up some. It seems like when you pass seventy, people start forgetting that you are a man, or that you ever were.

Turkey walked over to Lamley and said, I've got a four-wheel drive Scout. I'll get it out.

For God's sake, man, why didn't you say so before? He had whirled around from the window and was staring angrily at Turkey. Why do you have to spend ten minutes beating around the bush?

Turkey said very seriously, Mister, you shut your aw. And if you get urge to open it, you remember who made that turn on to an unploughed road in the middle of a god-damned blizzard?

He started to say something, and then shut his mouth. Turkey's face had risen up in his cheeks. Turkey went out to get his Scout out of the garage. I felt around under the bar for his chrome mask and tied it to his hands. I figured we might need it before this night was over.

Maine blizzard, ever been out in one?

The snow comes flying so thick and fine that it looks like sand and sounds like that, beating on the sides of your car or pickup. You don't want to use your high beams because they reflect off the snow and you can't see ten feet in front of you. With the low beams on, you can see maybe fifteen feet. But I can live with the snow. It's the wind I don't like when it picks up and begins to howl, driving the snow into a hundred weird flying shapes and sounding like all the hate and pain and fear in the world. There's death in the throat of a snowstorm wind, white death, and maybe something beyond death. That's no sound to hear when you're tucked up all cozy in your own bed with the shutters bolted and the doors locked. It's that much worse if you're driving. And we were driving smack into Salem's Lot.

Hurry up a little, can't you? Lamley asked.

I said. For a man who came in half frozen you're in one hell of a hurry to end up walking again.

He gave me a resentful, belligerent look and didn't say anything else. We were moving up the highway at a steady twenty-five miles an hour. It was hard to believe that Billy Larabee had just ploughed this stretch an hour ago. Another two inches had covered it and it was drifting in. The strongest gusts of wind rocked the scout on her springs. The headlights showed a swirling white nothing up ahead of us. We hadn't met a single car.

About ten minutes later Lumley gasps. Hey! What's that?

He was pointing out my side of the car. I'd been looking dead ahead. I turned, but was a shade too late. I thought I could see some sort of slumped form fading back from the car, back into the snow, but that could have been imagination.

What was it? A deer? I asked.

I guess so, he says, sounding shaky. But its eyes, they looked red. He looked at me. Is that how a deer's eyes look at night? He sounded almost as if he were pleading.

They can look like anything, I says, thinking that might be true, but I've seen a lot of deer at night from a lot of cars and never saw any set of eyes reflect back red.

Tookey didn't say anything.

About fifteen minutes after we came to a place where the snowbank on the right of the road wasn't so high because the ploughs are supposed to raise their blades a little when they go through an intersection.

This looks like where we turned, Lumley said, not sounding too sure about it. I don't see the sign.

This is it, Tookey answered. He didn't sound like himself at all. You can just see the top of the signpost.

Oh, Sure, Lumley sounded relieved. Listen, Mr. Locklander, I'm sorry about being so short back there. I was cold and we tried and calling myself two hundred kinds of fool. And I want to thank you both.

Don't thank Booth and me until we've got them in this car, Tookee said. He put the Scout in four-wheel drive and slammed his way through the snowbank and on to Jefferson Avenue, which goes through the Lot and out to 795. Snow flew up from the mudguards. The rear end tried to break a little bit, but Tookee's been driving through snow since Hector was a pup. He jockeyed it a bit, talked to it, and on we went. The head lights picked out the bare indication of other tyre tracks from time to time, the ones made by Lumley's car, and then they would disappear again. Lumley was leaning forward, looking for his car. And all at once Tookee said, Mr Lumley.

What? He looked around at Tookee.

People around these parts are kind of superstitious about Salem's Lot, Tookee says, sounding easy enough but I could see the deep lines of strain around his mouth and the way his eyes kept moving from side to side. If your people are in the car, why, that's fine. We'll pack them up and back to my place, and tomorrow, when the storm's over, I'll be glad to yank your car out of the snowbank. But if they're not in the car...

Not in the car? Lumley broke in sharply. Why wouldn't they be in the car?

If they're not in the car, Tookee goes on, not answering we're going to turn around and drive back to Falmouth Center and whistle for the sheriff. Makes no sense to go walking out and at night in a snowstorm anyway, doesn't it?

They'll be in the car. Where else would they be?

I said, One other thing, Mr Lumley. If we should see anybody, we're not going to talk to them. Not even if they talk to us. You understand that?

Very snow, Lumley says. Just what are these superstitions?

Before I could say anything, God alone knows what I would have said, Tookee broke in. We're there.

We were coming up on the back end of a big Mercedes. The whole hood of the thing was buried in a snowdrift, and

another drift had socked in the whole left side of the car. But the tail lights were on and we could see exhaust drifting out of the tailpipe.

'They didn't run out of gas anyway,' Lumley said.

Tooley pulled up and pulled on the Scout's emergency brake. 'You remember what Booth told you,' Lumley said.

'Sure, sure.' But he wasn't thinking of anything but his wife and daughter. I don't see how anybody could blame him, either.

'Ready, Booth?' Tooley asked me. His eyes were on me, grey and grey in the dashboard lights.

'I guess I am,' I said.

We all got out and the wind grabbed us, throwing snow in our faces. Lumley was first, bending into the wind, his fancy topcoat billowing out behind him like a sail. He cast two shadows, one from Tooley's headlights, the other from his own tail lights. I was behind him, and Tooley was a step behind me. When I got to the trunk of the Mercedes, Tooley grabbed me.

'Let him go,' he said.

'Janey, Francie, Lumley,' he said. 'Everything okay?' He pulled open the driver's-side door and leaned in. 'Everything?' he asked.

He froze to a dead stop. The wind ripped the heavy door right out of his hand and pushed it all the way open.

'Holy God, Booth,' Tooley said, just below the scream of the wind. 'I think it's happened again.'

Lumley turned back towards us. His face was scared and bewildered. His eyes white. All of a sudden he lunged towards us through the snow, slipping and almost falling. He brushed me away like I was nothing and grabbed Tooley.

'How did you know?' he roared. 'Where are they? What the hell is going on here?'

Tooley broke his grip and shoved past him. He and I looked into the Mercedes together. Warm as toast it was, but it wasn't going to be for much longer. The little amber

low-fuel light was glowing. The big car was empty. There was a child's Barbie doll on the passenger's floor mat. And a child's ski parka was crumpled over the seat back.

Tooley put his hands over his face and then he was gone. Lumley had grabbed him and shoved him right back into the snowbank. His face was pale and wild. His mouth was working as if he had chewed down on some bitter stuff he couldn't yet unpacker enough to spit out. He reached in and grabbed the parka.

'Francie's coat?' he kind of whispered. And then loud, bellowing, 'Francie's coat!' He turned around, holding it in front of him by the little fur-trimmed hood. He looked at me, blank and unbelieving. 'She can't be out without her coat on. Mr Booth. Why... why... she'll freeze to death.'

'Mr Lumley—'

He blundered past me still holding the parka, shouting, 'Francie Janey! Where are you? Where are youuu?'

I gave Tooley my hand and pulled him to his feet. 'Are you all—'

'Never mind me,' he says. 'We've got to get hold of him, Booth.'

We went after him as fast as we could, which wasn't very fast with the snow hip-deep in some places. But then he stopped and we caught up to him.

'Mr Lumley?' Tooley started, laying a hand on his shoulder.

'This way,' Lumley said. 'This is the way they went. Look!'

We looked down. We were in a kind of dip here and most of the wind went right over our heads. And you could see two sets of tracks, one large and one small, just filling up with snow. If we had been five minutes later they would have been gone.

He started to walk away his head down and Tooley grabbed him back. 'No! No! Lumley!'

Lumley turned his wild face up to Tooley's and made a

bst. He drew it back — but something in Tokey's face made him take it. He looked from Tokey to me and then back again.

"She — freeze," he said, as if we were a couple of stupid kids. "Don't you get it? She doesn't have her jacket on and she's only seven years old."

"They could be anywhere," Tokey said. "You can't follow these tracks. They'll be gone in the next drift."

"What do you suggest?" Lumley said, his voice high and hysterical. "If we go back to get the police, she — freeze to death! France and my wife!"

"They may be frozen already," Tokey said. His eyes caught Lumley's. "Frozen or something worse."

"What do you mean?" Lumley whispered. "Get it straight goddamnit! Tell me!"

"Mr. Lumley, Tokey says — there's something in the Lot."

"But I was the one who came out with it finally," said the word I never expected to say. "Vampires. Mr. Lumley, Jerusalem's Lot is full of vampires. I expect that's hard for you to swallow."

He was staring at me as if I'd gone green. "Loonies," he whispers. "You're a couple of loonies." Then he turned away, cupped his hands around his mouth, and he howled "FRANCIE JANEY!" He started floundering off again. The snow was up to the hem of his fancy coat.

I looked at Tokey. "What do we do now?"

"Follow him," Tokey says. His hair was plastered with snow, and he did look a little bit loony. "I can't just leave him out here. Booth. Can you?"

"No," I says. "Guess not."

So we started to wade through the snow after Lumley as best we could. But he kept getting farther and farther ahead. He had his youth to spend, you see. He was breaking the trail, going through that snow like a blur. My asthma began to bother me something terrible, and I started to lock down at my legs, telling myself: A little

further just a little further keep goin' darlin' I keep goin' + + +

I piled right into Tooley who was standing spread-legged in a drift. His head was hanging and both of his hands were pressed to his chest.

Tooley I says you okay?

I'm all right he said taking his hands away. We I stick with him Booth and when he tags out he I see reason.

We topped a rise and there was Lumley at the bottom looking desperately for more tracks. Poor man there wasn't a chance he was going to find them. The wind blew straight across down there where he was and any tracks would have been rubbed out three minutes after they was made let alone a couple of hours.

He raised his head and screamed into the night *FRANCIE JANIE FOR GOD'S SAKE!* And you could hear the desperation in his voice the terror and pity him for it. The only answer he got was the freight train wail of the wind. It almost seemed to be aughin' at him saying *I took them Master New Jersey with your funny car and come i's hair top o'at I took them and I rubbed out their tracks and by morning I'll have them just as near and frozen as two strawberries in a deeptree, e*

Lumley! Tooley bawled over the wind Listen you never mind vampires or bogies or nothing like that but you mind this. You're just making it worse for them. We got to get the -'

And then there was an answer a voice coming out of the dark like little tinkling silver bells and my heart turned cold as ice in a cistern.

*Jerry Jerry is that you?*

Lumley wheeled at the sound. And then she came drifting out of the dark shadows of all the copse of trees like a ghost. She was a city woman all right and right then she seemed like the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I felt like I wanted to go to her and tell her how glad I was she was safe after all. She was wearing a heavy green pullover

soft thing a poncho I believe they recalled. It floated all around her and her dark hair streamed out in the wind wind like water in a December creek just before the winter freezes over it and locks it in.

Maybe I did take a step towards her because I felt Tokey's hand on my shoulder rough and warm. And still how can I say it? I yearned after her so dark and beautiful with that green poncho floating around her neck and shoulders as exotic and strange as to make you think of some beautiful woman from a Walter de la Mare poem.

"Jones" Lumley cried. "Jones!" He began to struggle through the snow towards her his arms outstretched.

"No" Tokey cried. "No, Lumley!"

He never even looked — but she did. She looked up at us and grinned. And when she did I felt my longing my yearning turn to horror as cold as the grave as white and sick as bones in a shroud. Even from this far we could see the yellowed glare in those eyes. They were less human than a werewolf's eyes. And when she grinned you could see how long her teeth had become. She wasn't human any more. She was a dead thing somehow come back to life in this black howling storm.

Tokey made the sign of the cross at her. She flinched back — and then grinned at us again. We were too far away and maybe too scared.

"Stop!" I whispered. "Can't we stop it?"

"I do ate Ruth" Tokey says grimly.

Lumley had reached her. He looked like a ghost horse coated in snow like he was. He reached for her — and then he began to scream. I'd hear that sound in my dreams that man screaming like a shoo in a nightmare. He tried to back away from her but her arms long and bare and as white as the snow snaked out and pulled him to her. I could see her rock her head and then thrust it forward.

"Breathe" Tokey said hoarsely. "We've got to get out of here!"

"And so we can. Run like rats. I suppose some would say

But those who would weren't there that night. We fled back down along our own backtrail, falling down, getting up again, slipping and sliding. I kept looking back over my shoulder to see if that woman was coming at us, grinning that grin and watching us with those red eyes.

We got back to the Scout and Tonkey doubled over holding his chest. Tonkey! I saw a badly scared. What

Tucker, he said. Been bad for five years or more. Get me around in the shotgun seat. Booth, and then get us the hell out of here!

I hooked an arm under his coat and dragged him around and somehow boosted him up and in. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes. His skin was waxy-looking and yellow.

I went back around the hood of the truck at a trot, and I stopped near tan into the little girl. She was just standing there beside the driver's-side door, her hair in pigtail, wearing nothing but a little bit of a yellow dress.

Mister, she said in a high, clear voice as sweet as morning mist. Won't you help me find my mother? She's gone and I'm so cold.

Honey, I said. Honey, you better get in the truck. Your mother's —

I broke off, and if there was ever a time in my life I was close to swooning, that was the moment. She was standing here, you see, but she was standing *on top* of the snow and there were no tracks, not in any direction.

She looked up at me then. Lumley's daughter Francie. She was no more than seven years old, and she was going to be seven for an eternity of nights. Her little face was a ghost & corpse white, her eyes a red and silver that you could fall into. And below her, aw I could see two small punctures like pinpricks, their edges horribly mangy.

She held out her arms at me and smiled. Pick me up, mister, she said softly. I want to give you a kiss. Then you can take me to my mommy.

I didn't want to, but there was nothing I could do. I was

leaning forward, my arms outstretched. I could see her mouth opening. I could see the little fangs inside the pink ring of her lips. Something nipped down her chin, bright and silvery, and with a dim, distant, faraway horror I realized she was drooling.

Her small hands clasped themselves around my neck and I was thinking, Well, maybe I won't be so bad, not so bad, maybe it won't be so awful after a while, when something black flew out of the Scout and struck her on the chest. There was a puff of strange smelling smoke, a flashing glow that was gone an instant later, and then she was backing away, hissing. Her face was twisted into a vampire mask of rage, hate, and pain. She turned sideways and then... and then she was gone. One moment she was there, and the next there was a twisting knot of snow that looked a little bit like a human shape. Then the wind tattered it away across the fields.

Booth Tooley whispered, Be quick now.

And I was. But not so quick that I didn't have time to pick up what he had thrown at that little girl from hell. His mother's *Devout Bible*.

That was some time ago. I'm a sight older now, and I was no chicken then. Herb Tuckander passed on two years ago. He went peaceful in the night. The bar is still there, some man and his wife from Waterville bought it, nice people, and they've kept it pretty much the same. But I don't go by much. It's different somehow with Tokes gone.

Things in the Lot go on pretty much as they always have. The sheriff found that fellow Lumey's car the next day, out of gas, the battery dead. Neither Tokes nor I said anything about it. What would have been the point? And every now and then a hitchhiker or a camper will disappear around there someplace, up in Schoolyard Hill or out near the Harmon's old cemetery. They'd turn up the following pack-sack or a paperback book all swollen and beached out by the rain or snow, or some such. But never the people.

I still have bad dreams about that stormy night we went out there. Not about the woman so much as the little girl, and the way she smiled when she held her arms up so I could pick her up. So she could give me a kiss. But I'm an old man and the time comes soon when dreams are done.

You may have an occasion to be traveling in southern Maine yourself one of these days. Pretty part of the country side. You may even stop by Tookey's Bar for a drink. Nice place. They kept the name just the same. So have your drink, and then my advice to you is to keep right on moving north. Whatever you do, don't go up that road to Jerusalem's Lot.

Especially not after dark.

There's a little girl somewhere out there. And I think she's still waiting for her good-night kiss.

## THE WOMAN IN THE ROOM

The question is: Can he do it?

He doesn't know. He knows that she chews them sometimes, her face wrinkling at the awful orange taste, and a sound comes from her mouth like splintering popsicle sticks. But these are different pills — gelatine capsules. The box says DARBON COMPLEX on the outside. He found them in her medicine cabinet and turned them over in his hands, thinking: Something the doctor gave her before she had to go back to the hospital. Something for the fucking nights. The medicine cabinet is full of remedies neatly lined up like a voodoo doctor's cures. Oui gris gris of the Western world. FEELS FROST ODDS. He has never used a suppository in his life and the thought of putting a waxy something in his rectum to soften his body heat makes him feel ill. There is no dignity in putting things up your ass. PHOSPHATE OF MAGNESIA, ANALINE, AFTER IT'S PAIN FORMULA, PROGBISMOL. More. He can trace the course of her illness through the medicines.

But these pills are different. They are like regular Darvon only in that they are grey gelatine capsules. But they are bigger, what his dead father used to call hosscock pills. The box says Asp. 350 gr. Darvon 10 gr. and could she chew them even if he was to give them to her. Would she? The house is still running, the refrigerator runs and shuts off, the furnace kicks in and out, every now and then the cuckoo bird peeks grumpily out of the clock to announce an hour, it a half. He supposes that after she dies it will fail to

Kevin and him to break up housekeeping. She's gone all right. The whole house says so. She

is in the Central Maine Hospital in Lewiston. Room 312. She went when the pain got so bad she could no longer go out to the kitchen to make her own coffee. At times when he's sick she cries without knowing it.

The elevator creaks going up and he finds himself examining the huge elevator certificate. The certificate makes it clear that the elevator is safe, creaks or no creaks. She has been here for nearly three weeks now and today they gave her an operation called a *cordotomy*. He's not sure if that is how it's spelled, but that is how it sounds. The doctor has told her that the *cordotomy* involves sticking a needle into her neck and then into her brain. The doctor has told her that this is like sticking a pin in an orange and spearing a seed. When the needle has poked into her pain centre, a radio signal will be sent down to the tip of the needle and the pain centre will be blown out. Like *up + g* *ng a 13*. Then the cancer in her belly will stop being such a nuisance.

The thought of this operation makes him even more uneasy than the thought of suppositories melting warmly in his anus. It makes him think of a book by Michael Crichton called *The Terminal Man* which deals with putting wires in people's heads. According to Crichton, this can be a very bad scene. You better believe it.

The elevator door opens on the third floor and he steps out. This is the odd thing of the hospital, and it smells like the sweet smelling sawdust they sprinkle over pulse at a county fair. He has left the pills in the glove compartment of his car. He has not had anything to drink before this visit.

The walls up here are two tone, brown on the bottom and white on top. He thinks that the only thing more somber than in the whole world that might be more depressing than brown and white would be pink and black. All hospital

corridors like giant Good-n-Plenty. The thought makes him smile and feel nauseated at the same time.

The corridors meet in a T in front of the elevator and there is a drinking fountain where he always stops to put things off his mind. There are pieces of hospital equipment here and there like strange playground toys. A stroller with chrome sides and rubber wheels, the sort of thing they use to wheel you up to the C.R. when they are ready to give you another birthmark. There is a large circular object whose function is unknown to him. It looks like the wheels you sometimes see in squirrel cages. There is a rolling TV tray with two bottles hanging from it like a Salvador Dali dream of ours. Down one of the two corridors is the nurses station and straight faced by coffee drifts out to him.

He gets his drink and then saunters down towards her room. He is scared of what he may find and hopes she will be sleeping. If she is he will not wake her up.

Above the door of every room there is a small square light. When a patient pushes his call bell on this light goes on glowing red. Up and down the hall patients are walking slowly wearing cheap hospital robes over their hospital underwear. The robes have blue and white piping and round collars. The hospital underwear is called "bubs". The bubs look all right on the women but decidedly strange on the men because they are like knee length dresses or slips. The men always seem to wear brown imitation leather slippers on their feet. The women favour knitted slippers with balls of yarn on them. His mother has a pair of these and calls them "mules".

The patients remind him of a horror movie called *The Night of the Living Dead*. They all walk slowly as if someone had unscrewed the tops of their cegans like mayonnaise jars and liquids were sloshing around inside. Some of them use canes. Their slow gait as they prudently up and down the halls is frightening but a sign of health. It is the walk of people who are going nowhere slowly, the walk

of college students in caps and gowns filing into a convocation hall.

Ectoplasmic music drifts everywhere from transistor radios. Voices babble. He can hear Black Oak Arkansas singing Jim Dandy / Go Jim Dandy / go Jim Dandy / a fave (a voice screams merely at the show hall walkers). He can hear a talk show host discussing Nixon in tones that have been dipped in acid like smoking quarts. He can hear a polka with French lyrics. Lewiston is still a French speaking town and they love their jigs and reels almost as much as they love to cut each other in the bars on lower Lisbon Street.

He pauses outside his mother's room and

for a while there he was freaked enough to come drunk. It made him ashamed to be drunk in front of his mother even though she was too doped and full of Euvan to know. Euvan is a tranquilizer they give to cancer patients so it won't bother them so much that they're dying.

The way he worked it was to buy two six packs of Black Label beer at Sonny's Market in the afternoon. He would sit with the kids and watch their afternoon programmes on TV. Three beers with Sesame Street, two beers during Mister Rogers, one beer during Electric Company. Then one with supper.

He took the other five beers in the car. It was a twelve- to two-mile drive from Raymond to Lewiston via Routes 302 and 212 and it was possible to be pretty well in the bag by the time he got to the hospital with one or two beers left over. He would bring things for his mother and leave them in the car so there would be an excuse to go back and get them and also drink another half beer and keep the high going.

It also gave him an excuse to piss outdoors, and somehow that was the best of the whole miserable business. He always parked in the side lot which was rutted, frozen November dirt and the cold night air assured full Brad for

contraction. Pissing in one of the hospital bathrooms was too much like an apotheosis of the whole hospital experience: the nurse's call button beside the hopper, the chrome handle twisted at a 45-degree angle, the bottle of pink disinfectant over the sink. Bad news. You better believe it.

The urge to drink going home was nil. So left over beers collected in the icebox at home and when there were six of them, he would

never have come. He had known. I was going to be this bad. The first thought that crosses his mind is She's not orange and the second thought is She's really dying quick now, as if she had a train to catch out there in no time. She's straining in the bed, not moving except for her eyes, but straining, as of her body, something is moving in there. Her neck has been smeared orange with stuff that looks like Mercurochrome and there is a bandage around her left ear where some humongous doctor put the rad  $\gamma$  needle in and blew out 60 per cent of her motor controls along with the pain centre. Her eyes follow him like the eyes of a point-by-the-numbers Jesus.

I don't think you better see me tonight, Johnny. I'm not so good. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

What is it?

Itches. I itch all over. Are my legs together?

He can't see if her legs are together. They are just a raised V under the ribbed hospital sheet. It's very hot in the room. No one is in the other bed right now. He thinks Room-mates come and room-mates go, but my mom stays on for ever. Christ!

They're together, Mom.

Move them down, can you, Johnny? Then you better go. I've never been in a fit like this before. I can't move anything. My nose itches. Isn't that a pitiful way to be, with your nose itching and not able to scratch it?

He scratches her nose and then takes hold of her calves through the sheet and pulls them down. He can put one

hand around both calves with no trouble at all, although his hands are not particularly large. She groans. Tears are running down her cheeks to her ears.

— Momma?

Can you move my legs down?

— I just did.

— Oh. That's all right, then. I think I'm crying. I don't mean to cry in front of you. I wish I was out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this.

Would you like a smoke?

Could you get me a drink of water first, Johnny? I'm as dry as an old cloth.

Sure.

He takes her glass with a flexible straw, puts it out and around the corner to the drinking fountain. A fat man with an elastic bandage on one leg is sailing slowly down the corridor. He isn't wearing one of the pinstriped robes and is holding his johnny closed behind him.

He has the glass from the fountain and goes back to Room 312 with it. She has stopped crying. Her lips grip the straw in a way that reminds him of camels he has seen in travelogues. Her face is scrawny. His most vivid memory of her in the life he lived as her son is of a time when he was twelve. He and his brother Kevin and this woman had moved to Maine so that she could take care of her parents. Her mother was old and bedridden. High blood pressure had made his grandmother senile and to add insult to injury had struck her blind. Happy eighty-sixth birthday. Here's one to grow on. And she lay in a bed all day long blind and senile, wearing large diapers and rubber pants, unable to remember what breakfast had been but able to recite all the Presidents right up to Ike. And so the three generations of them had lived together in that house where he had so recently found the pills (although both grand-parents are now long since dead) and at twelve he had been sipping off about something at the breakfast table, he doesn't remember what but something and his mother

had been washing out her mother's pussy diapers and then running them through the wringer of her ancient washing machine and she had turned around and pushed in with one of them and the first strap of the wet heavy diaper had uprooted a nail in Sweetie K and sent it spinning wildly across the table like a large blue tiddlywink and the second blow had stamped his back not hurting but stunning the smart talker the smug hand the woman now lying shranken in this bed in this room had whipped him again and again saying You keep your big mouth shut there's nothing the atomity out there now but your mouth and so you keep I shot until he rested his grins the same as ever and each taunted word was accompanied by a strap of his grandmothers wet diaper it was like a bandage her smart things he might have had to say just evaporated There was not a chance in the world for smart talk He had discovered him but his an I for a time that there is nothing in the world so perfect to satisfy a twelve year old's impression of his place in the scheme of things at a proper perspective as being beaten across the back with a wet grandmother's diaper It had taken two years of it but I say to learn the art of sweating off

She checks on the water a minute and it frightens him even though he has been thinking about giving her piss He asks her again if she would like a cigarette and she says

It's not any trouble Then you better go Maybe I'll be better tomorrow

He shakes a hand at it one of the packages scattered on the table is her bed and right it He holds it between the first and second fingers of the right hand and she pushes him away from it to grasp the litter Her intake is weak The smoke drifts from her lips

I had to lie two years so my son could hold my cigarettes for me

— I don't mind

She puts her hand behind the litter against her nose and says that he glances away from it in her eyes and sees they are closed

Mem'

The eyes open all the vaguely  
Johnny'

- Right.

How long have you been here?

- Not long. I think I better go. Let you sleep

- Hmmm

He snuffs the cigarette in her ashtray and slinks from the room thinking I want to talk to that doctor. Goddamn it. I want to talk to the doctor who did that.

Getting into the elevator he thinks that the word doctor becomes a synonym for man after a certain degree of proficiency in the trade has been reached as if it was an expected provisioned thing that doctors must be cruel and thus attain a special degree of humanity. But

'I don't think she can really go on much longer' he tells his brother later that night. His brother lives in Anoover seventy miles west. He only gets to the hospital once or twice a week.

But is her pain better?' Key asks

She says she itches. He has the pills in his sweater pocket. His wife is safely asleep. He takes them out, stolen loot from his mother's empty house where they all once lived with the grandparents. He turns the box over and over in his hand as he talked, like a rabbit's foot.

'Well then she's better.' For Key everything is always better as if life moved towards some sublime vertex. It is a view the younger brother does not share.

'She's paralyzed'

Does it matter at this point?

'Of course it matters!' he bursts out thinking of her legs under the white ribbed sheet.

'John, she's dying.'

'She's not dead yet.' This in fact is what horrifies him. The conversation will go around in circles from here the profits accruing to the telephone company but this is the

rub. Not dead yet. Just lying in that room with a hospital tag on her wrist, listening to phantom radios up and down the hall. And

she's going to have to come to grips with time. The doctor says. He is a big man with a red, sandy beard. He stands maybe six foot four, and his shoulders are heroic. The doctor led him tactfully out into the hall when she began to nod off.

The doctor continues.

You see, as the motor impairment is almost unary and she is an operator like the corduroy, your mother has some movement in the left hand now. She may reasonably expect to recover her right hand in two to four weeks.

Will she walk?

The doctor looks at the dried wreckage of the doctor, ridiculous. His beard crawls all the way down to the collar of his plaid shirt, and for some ridiculous reason Johnny thinks of Algernon Swinburne. Why he could not say. This man is the opposite of poor Swinburne in every way.

I should say not. She's lost too much ground.

She's going to be bedridden for the rest of her life?

I think that's a fair assumption, yes.

He begins to see some admiration for this man who he hoped would be safe & hateful. Disgust follows the feeling must he accord admiration for the simple truth?

How long can she live like that?

It's hard to say. That's more like it. The tumour is blocking one of her kidneys now. The other one is operating fine. When the tumour blocks it, she'll go to sleep.

A terminal coma?

Yes, the doctor says, but a little more cautiously. Uremia is a techno-pathological term usually the property of doctors and medical examiners alone. But Johnny knows it because his grandmother died of the same thing, although

there was no cancer involved. Her kidneys simply packed it in and she died floating in internal piss up to her rib-cage. She died in bed at home at dinner time. Johnny was the one who first suspected she was truly dead this time and not just sleeping in the comatose open-mouthed way that old people have. Two small tears had squeezed out of her eyes. Her old toothless mouth was drawn in, reminding him of a tomato that has been hollowed out, perhaps to hold egg salad, and then left forgotten on the kitchen shelf for a stretch of days. He held a round cosmetic mirror to her mouth for a minute and when the glass did not fog and show the image of her tomato mouth he called for his mother. All of that had seemed as right as this did wrong.

She says she still had pain. And that she itches.

The doctor taps his head so emptily like Victor DeGroot in the old psychiatrist cartoons.

She *imagines* the pain. But it is nonetheless real. Real to her. That is why time is so important. Your mother can no longer count time in terms of seconds and minutes and hours. She must restructure those units into days and weeks and months.

He teases what this burly man with the beard is saying, and it boggles him. Abel dings softly. He cannot talk more to this man. He is a technical man. He talks smoothly of time as though he has gripped the concept as easily as a fishing rod. Perhaps he has.

Can you do anything more for her?

- Very little.

But his manner is serene as if this were right. He is after all not offering false hope.

Can it be worse than a clump?

Of course it can. We can't chart these things with any real degree of accuracy. It's like having a shark loose in your body. She may bloat.

- Bloat?

Her abdomen may swell and then go down and then

she again. But why dwell in such things now. The review we can safely say

that they would be the last but suppose they don't. Or suppose they catch me? I don't want to go to court in a merely killing charge. Not even if I can beat it. I have no assets to defend. He thinks of newspaper headlines screaming such fat and gaudy

Sitting in the parking lot, he turns the body over and over in his hands, trying to figure. The question is, is Can he do it. Should he? She has said I wish I were out of here. I'd do anything to be out. That Kevin is taking off fixing her a room at his house so she won't die in the hospital. The hospital wants her out. They gave her some new pills and she went on a ravine bummer. That was four days after the mastectomy. They'd like her to replace else because no one has perfected a really tough total mastectomy yet. And at this point, if they got it all out of her she'd be left with nothing but her legs and her head.

He has been thinking of how time must be for her - like something that has got out of control - like a sewing basket full of threaded spools spooled all over the floor for a big mean time to play with. The days in Room 52. The night in Room 52. They have run a string from the call button around it to her left index finger because she can no longer move her hand far enough to press the button. Is she thinks she needs the be span.

It doesn't matter too much anyway because she can't feel the pressure down there. her midsection might as well be a sawdust pile. She moves her bowels in the bed and pees in the bed and only knows when she smells it. She is down to a new five pounds from one fifty and her body's muscles are so unstringing that it's only a loose bag tied to her brain like a child's sack puppet. Would it be any different at Kevin? Can he do murder? He knows it's murder. The were kind matricide as the were a sentient species man. Is Ray Bradbury's horror story determined to turn the

tables and abort the anima, that has given it life. Perhaps it is his fault anyway. He is the only child to have been nurtured inside her, a change of life baby. His brother was adopted when another smiling doctor told her she would never have any children of her own. And of course the cancer now in her began in the womb like a second child, his own darker twin. His life and her death began in the same place. Should he not do what the other is doing already, so slowly and clumsily?

He has been giving her aspirin on the sly for the pain she imagines she has. She has them in a *Secrets* box in her hospital-table drawer along with her get-well cards and her reading glasses that no longer work. They have taken away her dentures because they are afraid she might pull them down her throat and choke on them so now she simply sucks the aspirin until her tongue is slightly white.

Surely he could give her the pills, three or four would be enough. Fourteen hundred grains of aspirin and four hundred grains of Darvon administered to a woman whose body weight has dropped 33 per cent over five months.

No one knows he has the pills, not Kevin, not his wife. He thinks that maybe they've put someone else in Room 312's other bed and he won't have to worry about it. He can cop out safely. He wonders if that wouldn't be best, really. If there is another woman in the room, his options will be gone and he can regard the fact as a nod from Providence. He thinks.

You're looking better tonight

Am I?

- Sure. How do you feel?

Oh, not so good. Not so good tonight.

Let's see you move your right hand.

She raises it off the counterpane. It floats splay fingered in front of her eyes for a moment, then drops. Thump. He smiles and she smiles back. He asks her

Did you see the doctor today?

Yes he came in. He's good to come every day. Will you give me a little water John?

He gives her some water from the flexible straw.

You're good to come as often as you do John. You're a good son.

She's crying again. The other bed is empty, accusingly so. Every now and then one of the blue and white pinstriped bathrobes walks by them up the hall. The door stands open half way. He takes the water gently away from her, thinking idiomatically. Is this glass half empty or half full?

How's your left hand?

- Oh, pretty good.

- Let's see.

She raises it. It has always been her smart hand, and perhaps that is why it has recovered as well as it has from the devastating effects of the curiotomy. She clenches it. Flexes it. Snaps the fingers weakly. Then it is back to the counterpane. I bump. She complains.

But there's no feeling in it.

Let me see something.

He goes to the wardrobe, opens it, and reaches behind the chair she came to the hospital in to get at her purse. She keeps it in here because she is paranoid about robbers. She has heard that some of the orderlies are rip-off artists who will lift anything they can get their hands on. She has heard from one of her room-mates who has since gone home that a woman in the new wing lost five hundred dollars which she kept in her shoe. His mother is paranoid about a great many things also, and has once told him a man sometimes hides under her bed in the late at night. Part of it is the combination of drugs they are trying on her. They make the hemmies he occasionally dropped in college look like Excedrin. You can have your pick from the locked drug cabinet at the end of the corridor just past the nurses station. UPS and downs lights and bummers. Death may be merciful death like a sweet black blanket. The wonders of modern science.

He takes the purse back to her bed and opens it

- Can you take something out of here?

Oh Johnny I don't know

He says persuasively

- Try it For me

The left hand rises from the counterpane like a crippled helicopter It cruises Dives Comes out of the purse with a single wrinkled Kleenex He applauds

- Good Good!

But she turns her face away

Last year I was able to pull two full dish trucks with these hands

If there's to be a time it's now It is very hot in the room but the sweat on his forehead is cold He thinks If she doesn't ask for aspirin I won't Not tonight And he knows if it isn't tonight it's never Okay

Her eyes flick to the half-open door slyly

- Can you sneak me a couple of my pills Johnny?

It is how she always asks She is not supposed to have any pills outside of her regular medication because she has lost so much body weight and she has built up what his druggie friends of his college days would have called a heavy thing The body's immunity stretches to within a fingernail's breadth of lethal dosage One more pill and you're over the edge They say it's what happened to Marilyn Monroe

I brought some pills from home

Did you?

- They're good for pain

He holds the box out to her She can only read very close She frowns over the large print and then says

I had some of that Darvon stuff before It didn't help me

- This is stronger

Her eyes rise from the box to his own Idly she says

- Is it?

He can only smile foolishly He cannot speak It is like the first time he got laid it happened in the back of some

friend's car and when he came home his mother asked him if he had a good time and he could only smile this same foolish smile

Can I chew them?

I don't know. You could try one

All right. Don't let them see

He opens the box and prises the plastic lid off the bottle. He pulls the cotton out of the neck. Could she do all that with the crippled helicopter of her left hand? Would they believe it? He doesn't know. Maybe they don't either. Maybe they wouldn't even care.

He shakes six of the pills into his hand. He watches her watching him. It is many too many, even she must know that. If she says nothing about it, he will put them all back and offer her a single Arthritis Pain Formula.

A nurse glides by outside and his hand twitches, clicking the grey capsules together, but the nurse doesn't look in to see how the cleftotomy kid is doing.

His mother doesn't say anything, only looks at the pills like they were perfectly ordinary pills (if there is such a thing). But on the other hand, she has never liked ceremony: she would not crack a bottle of champagne on her own boat.

- Here you go,

he says in a perfectly natural voice, and pops the first one into her mouth.

She gums it reflectively until the gelatin dissolves, and then she winces.

- Taste bad? I won't

- No, not too bad

He gives her another. And another. She chews them with the same reflectively look. He gives her a fourth. She smiles at him and he sees with horror that her tongue is yellow. Maybe if he hits her in the belly she will bring them up. But he can't. He could never hit his mother.

Will you see if my legs are together?

- Just take these first

He gives her a fifth. And a sixth. Then he sees if her legs are together. They are. She says,

- I think I'll sleep a little now.
- All right. I'm going to get a drink.
- You've always been a good son, Johnny.

He puts the bottle in the box and tucks the box into her purse, leaving the plastic top on the sheet beside her. He leaves the open purse beside her and thinks: *She asked for her purse. I brought it to her and opened it just before I left. She said she could get what she wanted out of it. She said she'd get the nurse to put it back in the wardrobe.*

He goes out and gets his drink. There is a mirror over the fountain, and he runs out his tongue and looks at it.

When he goes back into the room, she is sleeping with her hands pressed together. The veins in them are big, rambling. He gives her a kiss and her eyes roll behind their lids, but do not open.

Yes.

He feels no different, either good or bad.

He starts out of the room and thinks of something else. He goes back to her side, takes the bottle out of the box, and rubs it all over his shirt. Then he presses the limp fingertips of her sleeping left hand on the bottle. Then he puts it back and goes out of the room quickly, without looking back.

He goes home and waits for the phone to ring and wishes he had given her another kiss. While he waits, he watches TV and drinks a lot of water.





a collection of horror stories  
that includes CHILDREN OF THE CORN,

# NIGHT SHIFT

is a shudderingly detailed map of the dark places that lie  
behind our waking, rational world.

These are tales to invade and paralyse the mind as the safe  
light of day is infiltrated by the creeping, peopled shadows of  
night. As you read, the clutching fingers of terror brush lightly  
across the nape of the neck, reach round from behind to  
clutch and lock themselves, white-knuckled,  
around the throat.

This is the horror of ordinary people and everyday objects  
that become strangely altered; a world where nothing is ever  
quite what it seems, where the familiar and friendly lure and  
deceive. A world where madness and blind panic become the  
only reality.

Stephen King's screenplay for *Cat's Eye* is based on —  
The Ledge and Quitters, Inc. — both in this collection.

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